

3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday after Pentecost  
Lectionary 11/Proper 6 (C)  
June 13, 2010  
Text: Luke 7:36—8:3

Pastor Aaron J. Couch  
First Immanuel Lutheran Church  
Portland, Oregon

Last week a friend of mine told about seeing someone who was homeless standing by the roadside. The man was holding a sign that read, “Do you know what it feels like to be invisible?” My friend shared how deeply moving, and surprising it was. Who knows how many times he had driven by people holding signs by the side of the road, not really seeing them. They were, in a way, invisible.

It was something like that in Jesus’ time as well. There were invisible people then, too, and our gospel story for this morning tells how one of them became visible. Jesus had been invited to a meal at the home of Simon, who was a Pharisee. In a way, it’s a little surprising that Jesus was there at all. The surprising part isn’t that Jesus was willing to come, but that he got invited in the first place. In that time, to share a meal with someone was an expression of acceptance. And one of the things that got Jesus in trouble with religious leaders like Simon was that he was willing to share a meal with anyone, including the people who were invisible to polite society. They included tax collectors who collaborated with the Roman occupation, prostitutes, people who didn’t keep all of the purity laws—all of whom would have been labeled as “sinners.” Jesus developed a reputation as a “friend of sinners” because he wanted to show that this is what God is like. God’s table has room for everyone.

At Simon’s house the dinner guests would have been reclining around a very low table. Each person would have been lying on their side, leaning in toward the table with a large pillow to rest on, with their feet stretched back behind them. But suddenly there was an interruption. A woman who was known in the community as a sinner entered Simon’s house, uninvited. Luke doesn’t tell us what her sin was. We only know that in the eyes of the religious authorities, in the eyes of people like Simon the Pharisee, she was outside of the people of God. She wasn’t supposed to be there. People like Simon didn’t want to be contaminated by people like her. She was supposed to know her place. She was supposed to be invisible.

But there she was. She came in and stood behind Jesus. We should probably understand that at some previous time she had met Jesus and had received his message of forgiveness. She had come to express her gratitude, bringing an expensive gift of fragrant ointment. She stood behind Jesus, and with the overpowering feeling of gratitude for the forgiveness she had received, she began weeping. And kneeling at Jesus’ feet, with tears flowing down her cheeks, then dripping onto Jesus’ feet, she untied her hair and tried to wipe the tears away. Then she began to kiss his feet and anoint them with the

ointment, revealing the depth of her gratitude and love.

Simon, though, was unable to recognize either the gratitude or the love. Instead, he got stuck on judgment. This woman was a sinner! She didn't belong in his house! And if Jesus were truly a prophet, he would know. He would know she was a sinner, that she was unclean, and that by touching Jesus she was contaminating him! But oh, if only Simon knew all that Jesus knew. Jesus knew the woman was a sinner. He also knew she was forgiven. In addition, Jesus could read Simon's judgmental attitude without Simon even saying a word. So Jesus told a little story and invited Simon to open his eyes to things he'd never seen before.

It's a simple little story, about forgiveness and gratitude. There are three characters—one with a small amount of debt, a small amount of forgiveness, and small amount of gratitude. The second has a much larger debt, a much larger amount of forgiveness and a much larger amount of gratitude. And then there's the money-lender, who has forgiven the debts of both of them. The thing that struck me about the story is that there isn't anyone who isn't in debt to the money-lender.

Now, in our house, "debt" is a four-letter word. I suppose it's actually a four-letter word anywhere (D-E-B-T). But I've never liked the idea of owing anyone anything. I've always wanted to be debt-free. But Jesus' story suggests that, when it comes to God, none of us is debt-free. God has given us everything—the gift of life, a beautiful world to live in, all we need from the bounty of creation, and others to share this life with. And we, without exception, have failed to treat these gifts with complete faithfulness. We've failed to honor God with our whole lives. We've failed to treat every person as a child of God. We've failed to care for God's creation so that it can continue to provide for the needs of all who come after us. To use the metaphor in Jesus' story, all of us are in debt to God. Maybe some of us feel that we acquired our debt in a little more colorful manner. But none of us is debt-free before God, because we are all *completely* dependent on God's continuing gifts of life and mercy. It's only a question of whether we're able to see it or not.

That was Simon's problem. He was in debt to God and didn't even realize it. He and the woman anointing Jesus' feet were kindred spirits, and he didn't recognize it. And that brings us to the best part of the story. After getting Simon to agree that forgiveness and gratitude are connected, Jesus asked him, "Do you see this woman?" It's kind of a funny question because, in one way, of course Simon had seen her. He'd seen little else since she'd come in. He saw her. He knew she was a sinner. And he knew that she wasn't supposed to be there. The judgments he was making went on and on.

In another way, though, Simon had never seen her at all. To him she was effectively invisible. He didn't see her as a child of God. He didn't see her as a forgiven sinner. He didn't see her as someone very much like himself. He

really didn't see her at all. But now Jesus wants Simon to not just see her, but to recognize her as a fellow child of God. Jesus wants Simon to recognize that they have both received gift upon gift and grace upon grace from God. And the woman's extravagant outpouring of gratitude makes fully visible Simon's own tight-fisted, very proper way of life. Simon never felt himself to be in debt to God, never felt himself to have been given any great gift, and so he never felt a need to pour out his heart in love.

Jesus' story was not only challenging for Simon, but also for us. The enduring temptation for religious people is to think of ourselves as "different" somehow. And in a way, we are. I mean, look—here we are on a Sunday morning. We're in church. We're not out there killing or stealing or committing adultery. But it's dangerous to begin comparing ourselves with anyone else. We might begin to fool ourselves into thinking we're not in debt to God, that we're not just like everyone. And that sort of foolishness will erode our capacity to see our lives with clarity, to feel gratitude, to stand in awe of God's wide mercy and great goodness, and open our hearts in our own unrestrained expression of thankfulness.

The woman in our story wept and poured out a costly treasure. I wonder what our response will be. Perhaps, like her, we will express our gratitude and devotion to God with tears, or perhaps in prayer, or by singing our hearts out in thanksgiving. And perhaps we too will need to pour out our treasure, sharing what we have with generosity that might seem outlandish to others. And as we pray happened for Simon, we pray that our own eyes might be opened, for the invisible to become visible, for everything around us to be seen with the love that God sees with. As God worked profound change at that table, may the same be true at our table today. Amen