

SERMON for Sunday, June 17, 2007
Luke 7:36-8:3

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Abiding and Amazing Grace

Why do we put so much time, effort, and expense into our image? We all do it, to some extent. We spruce up our houses and yards, particularly at this time of the year, hoping to have incredibly thick and crab-grass-free turf, fragrant and colorful roses spilling over fences. We get our hair cut and colored, our faces nipped and tucked or at least smoothed out with creams and foundations. And men, don't get too smug on this one – beauty and fashion are just as important to you as to women! We have all kinds of reasons, those we understand and those we don't, some are for internal satisfaction and some to feed deep hungers for approval. I would like to share with you a story I read recently from Episcopalian Sallie Verette, and a comment on our gospel text today about the woman who came to Jesus. The story is about a woman whom Sallie met in an on-line course on pastoral care, illness, and healing. She writes, *Donna weighs 465 pounds. She has said that it is sort of like wearing all her sins painted on her body for the entire world to see. She feels marginalized, that people believe that fat people stink, that they are ugly, and are not recognized as people. At times, she has suffered with drug abuse, alcohol abuse, compulsive eating. Her burden is visible to everyone, and at the same time she feels that her soul, the spark of Christ within her, is not visible to anyone. And the most tragic aspect is that she does not value herself, either. She truly feels that she is not worthy to ask for prayers at a healing service. The other day she commented that she is beginning to understand that what she is actually doing is committing slow suicide. At this point, she simply does not have enough Christian hope to give serious consideration to the possibility of healing. As I hold her in my prayers, I pray that at some point God will give her the courage that the woman in today's passage had. This woman, this sinner, recognized Jesus and recognized God's infinite love for her and infinite capacity for forgiveness.**

And there, my friends, is the essence of the gospel for today, the essence of the entire Bible, the essence and the whole of the good news for each one of us, and for the whole world: God's infinite love. Infinite – endless and with no limitation. No strings, no requirements, no expiration date. Time and time again we hear the stories of love like that, and time and time again we forget, and time and time again we need to hear a repeat. So let's go over the details. Jesus was invited to the house of Simon the Pharisee for dinner. Who knows why, but the Pharisees were legalistic religious practitioners, and were consistently trying to trap Jesus in a slip-up on the rules. Simon coolly welcomed Jesus into his home, and it seems as if he ignored the customary offer of footwashing, which was common courtesy, a valued mark of acceptance and honor. In fact, to have skipped this part of the welcome was to have shown disdain, a slap in the face. An uninvited guest shows up, too, a woman who, from all inferences, is an unknown, perhaps even a prostitute, a woman of the streets, although it is never specified, and showers upon Jesus all the kindness, all the generosity, all the welcome that the host ignored. And then some, using not water and a towel for Jesus' feet, but her tears, her hair, and expensive and fragrant oil. Simon was sure that this was wrong on the part of Jesus, to accept the woman's ministrations, for in his mind a true prophet, a person of God, would not have even mingled with such a sinner lest the contamination jump from hand to hand, figuratively if not literally. Jesus, fully aware of the glares and stares from Simon,

sought to set him straight. He taught in a parable, a brief teaching story, the truth about welcome, about forgiveness, about love.

We hear and read a lot about forgiveness, and about the power for our positive mental health, when we let go of the anger and destructiveness of hurt committed against us. And we focus on the specific, coming face to face, if possible, with the person who did whatever was cruel, dishonest, perhaps even violent and abusive, either in a single moment or over and over again. We all have read stories of the parent of a murdered child who has sought the way of forgiveness rather than vengeance, and found some comfort and enough peace to move forward in life. And we know the need for each one of us to acknowledge our own personal shortcomings and failures and errors of judgment and hurtful actions, to come face to face with our selves and confess to God that we have broken and defaced the image in which we were created. But this story isn't about forgiveness for anything specific, about any particular crime or behavior or issue, about one moment. It is a story not about sin but about the sinner, a story not about the way in which we offer forgiveness but about the One who forgives.

Jesus knew Simon pretty well, it seems, and that Simon needed some direct, heart-to-heart conversation. *I have something to say to you...* When Jesus concluded the brief parable, Simon gave the right answer, that the one who owed the creditor a lot of money would especially appreciate the cancellation of the debt by the banker. But Jesus also knows the woman quite well, as he knows us all. The woman needs acceptance, no matter what she has done or not done. The woman needs to be free of her past. The woman needs the cleansing of tears, the promise of renewal, a new beginning. The woman needs the open and welcoming arms of the Savior. And as she takes the risk of opening her heart to God, she opens herself to the possibility of great joy, as she opens her heart to the love of God she is capable of great love. I appreciate this story of Jesus, that places us square in the middle of a conversation with Jesus. *I have something to say to you...* this conversation begins... *enough of your posturing and posing and pretending in this journey of faith to which I call you. I love you and accept you the way you are, needy and troubled, broken and hurting.* As we hear the words of Jesus we often hear them with the ears of a Simon, the instruction for specific situations, rules to follow, steps to take. Simon was, most likely, a good man, active in his synagogue, interested in his community. He even invited Jesus to dinner. But Jesus does not just invite us to a life of rule-following, a safe life within accepted boundaries, a life of carefulness. We are invited to be like the unnamed woman.

As most of you know, that while I serve this Lutheran congregation, I am a minister of the Presbyterian Church, and serve actively in our local presbytery, which has the same approximate geographic boundaries of our South-Central Synod. I currently serve on a commission for the Presbytery exploring the possibilities of starting a new Presbyterian congregation in the Sun Prairie area. Eight of us, ministers and lay-people alike, have been working on this for almost three years, and are getting close to beginning the project by calling a church development pastor. Last week we spent a couple of hours wrestling with the wording of our mission statement, the vision that will guide this new community of faith. We came up with a long list of words and concepts, struggling with churchy language - confession and sacraments and worship and mission and grace and gratitude - that some in our group feel creates a barrier for those who are unfamiliar with it, and non-threatening language - inviting and friendly and committed and caring and dreaming - which some in our group feel is not definitive enough, not descriptive enough of what a congregation of those who

follow Christ should be and do. We have yet to get it all down on paper, although it is coming to life on my computer, as I volunteered to pull it all together, by Monday. It is my hope that we will not shy away from words that will describe God's dream of a community of the forgiven, a community where all are welcome, a community of life lived together in the transforming love of Jesus.

Jesus told that sinner woman, told that sinner man, to live in peace, because their great burdens were lifted and carried and shared. They were given, an amazing and abiding grace, a grace to change them and fill them and sustain them, not just at that moment, but always.

Writer Anne Lamott tells of a time of grace in her life, and concludes, *The spirit lifted me and now it holds on lightly, like my father's hands around my ankles when I used to ride on his shoulders. In one of my earliest memories, I see myself on Halloween, four years old. My older brother is up ahead with his kindergarten friends, dressed as a hobo with a burnt-cork mustache. My father and I are walking past the school where I will start a year later. I can see the blacktop of the playground illuminated by a streetlight. My father is holding on to my mask. I am too afraid to wear it. I am afraid of everything at that age – the dark, my dreams, sleeping alone, snakes. And I hate masks, because you can't breathe right, or see very well through the eyeholes – I must have still had my wits about me. But I love my silky costume. I remember picking it out all by myself, for the first time ever, at the five-and-dime. It is black with a white oval on the chest. I am a panda. We walk along on the scariest night of all, one of my father's hands holding my mask, one holding me lightly through the darkness.***

Thanks be to God for the gift of amazing and abiding grace. Amen.

*Sallie Verrette, iowatelecom.net, June 13, 2004

**Anne Lamott, *Grace(Eventually)*, Riverhead Books, New York, 2007, p. 58