



The Rev. Alan Sutherland, Rector

Sunday, June 17 2007

3 Pentecost, 2007

One of the great ironies of the life of Jesus as told by the gospel writers is that Jesus had his worst problems with good people.

You know we regard Jesus as the best person who ever lived and we would suppose that he would have been on good terms with good people and not so good terms with bad people. But that was not the case and over and over again that order was reversed.

Jesus clashed with respectable citizens. Jesus was great friends with moral outcasts.

And today's gospel is a classic example of this. Jesus was invited to the home of Simon the Pharisee for dinner. Now it was not uncommon for a crowd to gather outside the walls to listen to the conversation, but this woman broke all the rules. She came in with oil, she cried, and she anointed Jesus' feet with oil and tears, and having no towel wiped them with her hair.

Now Simon, in his mind no doubt, had serious doubts about Jesus' character. The woman was known to be a sinner, probably a prostitute, and no self respecting man, let alone a prophet, would allow himself to be touched by such a woman. Simon's silence spoke volumes. He felt nothing but contempt for the entire episode.

And Jesus saw it on Simon's face and refused to let it go unchallenged. So he told a simple story about two debtors and he made Simon answer the question.

But Jesus did not stop there. Jesus went on to remind Simon of his own half hearted hospitality and compared it to the woman.

Before the end of the night Jesus had befriended an out and out sinner and alienated one of the town's most respectable citizens.

And this happened often. So what was it about Jesus? Did he place some kind of premium on sin? Did he favor vice over virtue? In his mind were the loose morals of a prostitute more acceptable than the disciplines of the Pharisee? That's clearly not the case.

Jesus hated sin because of what it does to the sinner and Jesus encouraged a way of living that would try to avoid sin. But Jesus would also warn us of the danger that virtue can also become a vice. That was the basis of the trouble Jesus had with the Pharisees. Jesus had no quarrel with them in their determination to live clean lives. In and of itself that was commendable but the problem was that many of them had crossed that invisible line. The line when virtue ceases to be virtue and becomes a vice .

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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One of the symptoms of this was they thought themselves to be better than other people. Simon the Pharisee is a classic example. He invites Jesus to his home but is barely cordial to him. He provides no water for his feet, a common custom. Gives him no kiss of greeting, a common custom.

For whatever reason Simon felt himself aloof of Jesus and looked down on him.

Now as for the woman, Simon regarded her as nothing more than trash. He would never have allowed himself to be touched by such a person. He knew what sort of a woman she was and to him she was not a real person with real needs and belonged to a class he called sinners. And all of the sinners, because of his righteousness, were beneath him.

You know Christianity calls us to live righteously, but we need to be very careful that we do not cross that invisible line where our virtue becomes a vice.

One of the other devastating symptoms of when virtue becomes a vice, is that we no longer feel the need to be forgiven. This was the major difference between Simon and the woman. The story of the 2 debtors could be easily misunderstood to suggest that the woman was a greater sinner than Simon by the ratio of 10 to one. That was not the meaning at all. The story actually had 2 points. One, that both debtors owed more than they could pay. The other that the woman was ten times more aware of this than Simon. She felt the need to be forgiven. Simon felt no such need.

George Bernard Shaw once said 'Forgiveness is a beggar's refuge. We must pay our debts.' That is partially true. Forgiveness is a beggars refuge. It is not a place we can demand anything. All we can do is ask. That part is true. But the part about paying our debts is mercifully false. How could we ever do that? In our lives we have hurt people we can no longer find. We have hurt others in ways we are not even aware. The only thing we can do is confess and allow the miracle of forgiveness to heal our hearts.

All of us are called to live lives worthy of our calling in Christ. But we all need to be careful. If we ever feel that we are better than anybody else, or if we ever stop feeling the need for God's forgiving grace we have crossed that invisible line where virtue becomes a vice.

Amen

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