

“DEAR SIMON”

A Sermon for the Fourth Sunday after Pentecost, June 12, 2016

Text: Luke 7:6-8:3

“If this man were a prophet,” said Simon, “he would have known that this woman is a sinner.”

The meaning of today’s Gospel reading is so crystal clear that I hesitate to give a sermon for fear I might introduce confusion. However, I can think of one person who may not have gotten the point, so I am going to address a sermon to him. That is Simon, the Pharisee who appears in the story. I am going to write to him as though I were Jesus, the next morning:

Dear Simon,

Thank you for inviting me to have supper with you last night. The lamb was done just right, and I appreciated everything you did to make it a nice evening.

I am writing to make sure you understand that I’m not mad at you for what happened, even if I did say some very harsh things to you about your hospitality. I had to make a point. And to make sure you got the point, let me explain it again in a different way. I know there are different types of intelligence, so maybe this explanation will help you.

Simon, I know you think you are right and I am wrong, you are clear and I am confused. But the truth is, you don’t even begin to know what the issue is.

You think the issue, before God, is judging people. You think you can take the words of Scripture, the word of God, and tell good people from bad people. You think the purpose of God’s law is to lay out the criteria by which we can make choices and become

good people. Straighten ourselves out, or just stay good.

But you’re wrong. The issue, as the Ten Commandments make clear, is whether you love God and your neighbor.

Whatever did that poor woman do that made you look askance at her ministry to me? She sinned? How? Do you know exactly? Who told you about it?

Whatever it is she did, I guess you never did that. Obviously, you think you are a righteous person, or you wouldn’t feel entitled to despise her as a sinner.

But are you really? Do you love God? Do you love me? Do you love that woman who washed my feet with her hair? She’s your neighbor, after all?

If you are so filled with love, why didn’t you greet me with a kiss? And why didn’t you anoint my head with oil? What was dinner all about? Were you trying to suss me out, decide whether I was a good enough person for you to love?

Simon, Simon, where is your love? Is your heart made of stone?

You thought to yourself, “If Jesus speaks for God, Jesus will say what God would say to that sinful woman. Like God, Jesus will condemn that woman, or make a show of sympathy. Something. Anything to indicate that, the way the prophet Nathan made clear to David that he knew how wicked he was. Nathan sure showed David, and I’d like to see Jesus show he also speaks for God. A discerning word, beyond intuition, indicating the importance of being holy and righteous. Let Jesus condemn that woman for her sin, and I will back him up.”

Simon, you thought that your thinking was from God. Perhaps this morning you still are angry with me, and you still think I have got it wrong. You are mad at me for embarrassing you in front of your company. (By the way, sorry for that. But you know, since I'm a prophet and all, I'm always tempted to call out sinners and point to their faults, especially in public. So, I guess when I saw what was wrong with you I proved I was a prophet, you see? Kidding.)

Actually, Simon, you were partly right. I do see sin. But you were mainly wrong. Because, when I see sin, my calling from God is not to condemn and destroy but to save. I may have a penchant for seeing through people, but my VOCATION from God, what God has called me to do on his behalf in this world, with whoever, is to heal and forgive.

Sorry I had to make such a scene there, praising a sinful woman as being a better person than you. But the difference between what you think the issue is, and what God says the issue is, is night and day. Literally. The law brings night. The gospel brings day.

When I looked at that woman, you thought I should be able to spot a sinner.

Well, that's not what I'm looking for.

I'm looking for two things, when I look at people: repentance and faith. Are they sorry, and do they believe me when I forgive and heal them.

When I looked at that woman, what did I see? I could hardly see the sin, because it was totally obscured by astounding quantities of repentance and faith. That silly bit about washing my feet and drying them with her hair and anointing them with expensive ointment? She was out of her mind with repentance and faith.

Simon, I see that and I like it. I see a whole lot of sinners in the world, people like you and her and like my disciples. I am sad when I see sin, just as you are sad when you see sin. (Or, in your case, when you hear about it.) But I am over the moon when I see

someone step out of the darkness into the light of God's mercy, repenting and believing. That is great stuff.

Because, when people stop being all haughty and judgmental, when people stop talking all the time about "those people," and so on, when people stop judging themselves by their private standards; and when they see themselves in the true light of God's law and repent, then see that God's mercy is the truth about his heart for us, then people rejoice and give thanks. Out of their hearts come streams of mercy and kindness and love of others.

Sometimes it gets a little crazy. Personally, I don't like it when people wash my feet because I'm ticklish. But I'm okay with crazy love for others. What I can't stand, and God can't stand, is when people enjoy judging and hating one another.

This is very important to me. I hope you got the point of the parable I told, even though it probably hurt at the moment to feel that you were the villain in the parable and I was judging you. If that hurt, good. Perhaps you are ready to repent!

And then, when you are sorry for not loving God and your neighbor as you ought to, then take one more step, look me in the eye, and listen to me when I look at you and say "Simon—your sins, too, are forgiven." Believe me. Trust me. And then—but not until then—go in peace.

Signed,

Your best friend (even if you don't know it yet), Jesus
bar-Joseph of Nazareth.