

“Challenged to Grow”

Luke 7:36-8:3

This whole scene takes place in the courtyard of Simon the Pharisee. In that first century rich people often had big houses built around an open courtyard in the middle. In the courtyard was a garden and fountain and in warm weather meals would be eaten there.

It was the custom that when a Rabbi or teacher came to a rich man's house for a meal, people were free to come off the street into the courtyard to listen to the teacher's wisdom and words.

So the scene is set. The wealthy Simon with the large house and open courtyard hears about this young, upstart Rabbi from Galilee that is passing through town. This Jesus is quickly becoming a celebrity so why not invite him over for a meal to see and hear what he's really made of. Is he really as great of a teacher as what people are saying he is?

Simon sends out the invitation and Jesus comes to his house. When an honored guest came to such a house, three things were always done. First, the host placed his hand on the guest's shoulder and gave him the kiss of peace on the cheek. That was a mark of respect which was never omitted when welcoming a distinguished Rabbi. But Simon doesn't do it to Jesus.

Second, cool water was always poured on the guest's feet to cleanse and comfort them. The roads were dirt and the Rabbis wore sandals. Simon offers no cleansing water for Jesus' feet.

Third, the guest's head was anointed with oil or sweet-smelling incense was burned

to take away the smell of the road. Again, Simon ignores this courtesy when Jesus enters his house.

Most likely, Simon liked to have celebrities come into his home, but this Jesus was too young at age 30 and too new to really deserve the usual courtesies, so Simon simply invites him to the table in the middle of the courtyard.

Following the custom of that day, Jesus does not sit, but reclines at the table. They layed on cushions, resting on the left elbow, leaving the right arm free to eat and drink with. And during the meal sandals were taken off.

Now a woman, heard on the streets that Jesus was speaking in the house of Simon. From the edge of the crowd gathering in the courtyard she listened to Jesus teach about repentance and forgiveness. A sinner, she quickly recognized in Jesus her salvation.

Moved by the Holy Spirit, she made her way to the center table and the reclining Jesus. Standing and then kneeling behind him at his feet, weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears, and wiped his feet with the hair of her head, and kissed his feet, and anointed his feet with oil.

Now when the Pharisee who had invited him in saw it, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner."

At this point Jesus could have responded to Simon with anger. "Simon, can't you see she is a child of God and just because she is poor and you are rich does not make her less than you in the eyes of God!"

Jesus could have been defensive. "Who are you to judge whether or not I'm a prophet and who should or should not be touching me?"

Or Jesus could have just ignored Simon, stood up, and left his house. Jesus does not get angry, defensive, nor does he get up and leave.

Rather, Jesus answered him, "Simon, I have something to say to you. A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed 500 denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he forgave them both. Now which of them will love him more?"

Jesus takes advantage of Simon's questioning him to pose a counter-question rather than to get angry, defensive, or to run away. "Now which of them will love him more?"

Simon answered, "The one, I suppose, to whom he forgave more." And Jesus said to him, "You have judged rightly."

Then turning toward the woman he said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house, you gave me no water for my feet, but she has wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much; but he who is forgiven little, loves little."

And Jesus said to her, "Your sins are forgiven. Your faith has saved you. Go in peace."

Jesus successfully turns Simon's hostile inquiry; "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is..." into an invitation to learning for

everyone present and listening in the courtyard.

Simon saw himself as a good and righteous man and therefore had no need for forgiveness. The woman, on the other hand, was all too conscious of her sin and her need for forgiveness. Jesus gives her forgiveness and her love for him is great in return. Her love for Jesus is the fruit of a forgiven heart. Love is the fruit of a forgiven heart.

The most obvious lesson we learn from this gospel story is that we all need to be like this woman in first recognizing our need for forgiveness. When we become like Simon and are so self-righteous that we see no need for forgiveness then we shut ourselves off from God and we shut ourselves off from people around us because we really believe we are better than they are.

First, we recognize our need for forgiveness and we take that need to Jesus. When we take our need to Jesus we will experience forgiveness, our heart will be changed, and we will learn to love again. Love is the fruit of a forgiven heart.

Once we recognize our need for forgiveness, how do we take that need to Jesus? We can't go listen to him in the courtyard of a wealthy neighbor. Where can we find Jesus and experience his forgiveness as did this woman in Simon's courtyard?

Where can we be challenged to grow in our faith as this woman and all who were present in the courtyard were challenged to grow in their faith? Where can we experience the gift of salvation from our God who has no other motive than loving us and forgiving us, expecting nothing in return? How can we follow this woman's example as well as the examples of Mary, Joanna, and Susanna in freely providing for Jesus out of our resources

in thanksgiving for his love, forgiveness, and most of all the gift of salvation through his death on the cross? How do we stay focused on Jesus as both gift and gift giver?

Each of you can answer those questions for yourselves in your individual relationship with God. In our communal relationship with God as Divinity Lutheran Church our leaders have prioritized six goals to challenge us to grow as a community in our faith journey. Each of these goals has been matched with the boards that can help accomplish them by answering the how, where, when questions for their particular ministry groups. The six goals in order of priority are:

1. Repair and Maintenance of our church building
2. Nurture of and commitment to our members
3. Increase outreach to new members
4. Reach out to inactive members
5. Increase programs for all age groups
6. Finding, training, and developing leadership.

It will take not only those of you serving on our boards and on our planning council working intentionally to accomplish these goals, but everyone in the congregation willingly sharing of you time, talent, and treasure – the 3-T's of stewardship in supporting and building our Divinity ministry together.

Finally, for those of you who are visual, we look at the picture on the bulletin cover (on the screen). Although this picture does not directly illustrate the story from Luke 7, it does illustrate the same theme of staying focused on Christ.

Jesus again, like last week, occupies the center, reminding us of his central importance in our lives. Jesus is lifting his hand in blessing, physically embodying the truth that he is the one “from whom all blessings flow.”

He sits at a table on which rests a chalice, pointing us to the Eucharist. Communion is both a grateful reception of God’s great gift in Jesus’ death and resurrection and our own praise and thanksgiving in response. Next to Jesus, the image of a bird reminds us of the Holy Spirit – Jesus’ gift of his continued presence among us, which we especially celebrate in the sacrament of Holy Baptism. The gift of the Holy Spirit comes through the waters of Baptism, the Holy Spirit comes through the Word of God spoken, the Holy Spirit comes through the faith of all of us gathered here to make Brooklyn a child of God to be raised and nurtured among God's children in the years to come. The Holy Spirit is Jesus' gift of his continued presence among us.

The women in the image are Mary and Martha giving gifts to Jesus: food, drink, service, and attentive devotion. Like the woman anointing Jesus’ feet in our story, our gifts that we give back to God are part of our grateful response to Jesus. Our worship today is our grateful response to God. Our working together to accomplish our ministry goals for Divinity are our grateful response to God. Financially supporting our ministries is our grateful response to God.

The more grateful to God we become both as individuals and as a church, the more sincerely thankful we are for all of God’s gifts, the more we grow in our capacity to give cheerfully back to God.

Last week we were “Called to Follow” Jesus into the depths, into the chaos of life, knowing he’d be present with us. This week we’re “Challenged to Grow” in our grateful giving back as our response for all that he has given us and forgiven us. Next week and every week we are “Sent to Serve.”

As the Body of Christ in the world, as the Church, may we always be “Called to Follow,” “Challenged to Grow,” and “Sent to Serve.” May Jesus always occupy the center of our lives. The may the peace of God . . .