

The Thankful Woman

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Galatians 2: 15 - 21

Luke 7: 36-50

Nic Denny-Dimitriou, Anglican Church of the Ascension, Hilton

In today's story about Jesus, he is invited to a dinner party in the home of a dedicated religious man named Simon. For Simon there were very clear teachings about what sort of behaviour was acceptable and what was not. Not only did he observe them rigorously, he also tried to ensure that others did too. The religious law was at the centre of his worldview. He invited Jesus, and was probably expecting some learned discussion among the guests about the centrality of the law, the code of conduct for all good people to live by.

To Simon's dismay, the dignified atmosphere is broken by the unwelcome intrusion of a woman. She's sobbing loudly, massaging Jesus' feet with some perfumed ointment, drying them with her hair and generally making quite a display. Now you can imagine how the invited guests feel. I mean, not only is this woman breaking in to their assembly in a most ill mannered fashion, but look what she's doing. She was all over him. Any more intimate and she'd have been taking her clothes off.

How would you feel if that happened to you? You wouldn't know where to look, would you? To make matters worse, this woman had a reputation in the town. We don't know why exactly, but whatever it was, the first word that came to everyone's mind when they thought of her was "Sinner."

Now although this was by no means expected behaviour everyone knew what the expected response from a religious man was. She must be shunned, put back in her place, kicked out. A religious man must be sober, dignified, respectable. He can't go having his feet massaged in public, let alone by a woman of ill repute. And so if Jesus is a prophet, as so many had been saying, surely he'd be the first to condemn sin and demand that God's law be rigidly observed.

So we've got two competing sets of expectations on Jesus here. Simon was clearly expecting Jesus to condemn the woman and throw her out. The woman was clearly expecting that he wouldn't do that, because she wouldn't have walked in there unless she was expecting Jesus to accept her, because she knew that no one else there was going to stand up for her. She felt an overwhelming sense of gratitude to Jesus about something, so much so that she just had to express it then and there in the most intimate fashion, and she clearly believed that Jesus would honour that even in the face of the horrified disapproval of his religious companions.

And he did. Jesus not only accepted her affections, but he used her as an example to Simon of what was wrong with him. Those who don't feel that they've needed forgiving, those who feel they have earned their acceptability, their good reputation, love little. They become arrogant and stuffy. Confident in their own cultivated goodness, they look down on those who haven't done it their way.

On the other hand, those who know they never made the grade, but who are accepted and honoured as a pure act of grace are beside themselves with gratitude and love. This woman had probably never been treated with dignity and respect by anyone before Jesus; now, on the basis of her response, he declares that she is accepted by God as well, and that her sins are forgiven. Outrageous!

This is an illustration of what the Apostle Paul said in our other reading: "A person is justified, or put right with God, not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ."

Not being orthodox Jews, most of us won't be accustomed to thinking of religious law as a basis for how you become acceptable. But is our culture really that different? I'm not so sure. We have different groups, each with its own set of expectations to which you are required to conform or be ostracised from the group. They vary by race and language group, by socio-economic status, by personal interests and all sorts of other criteria. But there are norms and standards, after all!

There's nothing wrong with any of these in themselves, and they define our group identity and that's OK.

And church can be just the same. Even people not involved in a church often have an idea that there are "rules" for those who go to church. While claiming with Paul that we are justified not by the works of law but by faith in Jesus Christ, the church can sometimes be just like another group that operates with set expectations that you must measure up to.

But if it is our faith in Christ that matters most, then it doesn't much matter which set of social expectations you measure up to because God is not interested in how competent you are at living up to a set of expectations, no matter how good a set it is. God is looking for relationship, for friendship, for intimacy. With me and you. And it is being offered with absolutely no preconditions other than willingness to respond. There is no behavioural entrance test.

Unfortunately for most of us, we have learnt the ability to meet the expectations of whatever particular groups we belong to, and this can blind us to our need for grace. Grace refers to acceptance that is absolutely undeserved and un-earnable; it is pure unconditional, unmerited love.

Ironically it's often those who haven't made the grade, like the woman at Simon's place, who first realize their need for grace. When they recognize the depth of love and intimacy that is being offered in Jesus, they don't hesitate. They throw themselves into it exuberantly. Sometimes, awkwardly, like the woman in today's story.

Those who are confident of their ability to make the grade without God's help perhaps feel no such gratitude. Like Simon they stay dignified, respectable, even staid. Mercy is for sinners, and if you've always done the right thing, you don't need mercy. And in that attitude, the invitation to relationship is overlooked.

The God of our Lord Jesus Christ is the most loving being in the universe and couldn't care less about your ability to do the right thing if you won't embrace the loving intimacy offered.