



SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE
in the City of New York
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector
www.SaintThomasChurch.org

Sunday, October 10, 2021
The Twentieth Sunday After Pentecost

Festal Evensong
4pm

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A Sermon by
The Rev. Mark Brown, *Honorary Assistant*
on
Luke 7:36-50
+

Free Pass

I think we're meant to be shocked. A woman is weeping at the feet of Jesus. The tears, the wiping with hair, the kissing and anointing of a man's feet, the raw emotion: it's meant to be unsettling, even embarrassing. Something is out of control—a line has been crossed. A clinical term for this is “disinhibition”.

Ordinarily we feel healthy controls around appropriate behavior. But all kinds of things can cause disinhibition: emotional state, intoxication, drug use, mental illness, brain damage, dementia, post-traumatic stress—any number of things. Bathing feet with tears? Wiping with hair? Non-stop kissing--of a man's feet? It's meant to be deeply unsettling. We're embarrassed for the woman.

We're told (rather dismissively) that the woman is a sinner. Sexual sins, perhaps? That's implied, but we don't know. And we don't know what the tears are about. Are they tears of remorse? Possibly. Or, are they tears of release and joy, the tears of a burden lifted, tears of gratitude? Possibly.

Or perhaps they're tears of sheer, weary frustration. Perhaps the woman realizes that whatever wonderful thing happens today with Jesus, tomorrow will be a lot like yesterday. Whatever conditions, whatever situation, whatever human frailty drove her sinful behavior yesterday will still be there tomorrow. Tomorrow's sin will be a lot like yesterday's.

Most of us don't wake up in the morning thinking of ways to be sinful. Possible, but not likely. Usually our sins emerge in the context of just doing the best we can to make our way through the day in a world that can be confusing, even overwhelming. Sin is often rooted in personal vulnerabilities we did not choose and circumstances we can't control. Emotional, psychological makeup can be highly resistant to change. We can be caught up in generational cycles of dysfunction, abuse, even violence. And, so, we can find ourselves falling into the same old traps, the same old sin, day by day.

Is the woman in the story a prostitute perhaps? If so, what circumstances, what personal vulnerabilities, what poverty drove her to that? Is she an adulteress? What passion enralls her? What drives her to seek forbidden love? Is she a thief? Does she have hungry children to feed? Is she mentally ill? Brain damage? Developmental issues? She doesn't speak at all—is she non-verbal? A victim of physical or emotional or sexual abuse? Addiction? What wounds, what insults to her humanity have formed her--and deformed her?

We don't know, but we do know that a lot can go wrong in a life. We human beings are notoriously subject to breakage. So, what can the word "sin" mean in the context of our fragility?

It seems to me we're going through a shift today in how we understand sin and guilt and culpability. Our understanding of ourselves and the human condition is increasingly enhanced by insights from the social sciences, the behavioral sciences and neurology. We are coming to understand that human behavior, for better or worse, is often rooted in genetic and environmental factors we can neither choose nor control.

And our personal histories shape us in profound ways. We cling to the idea of personal responsibility—we cherish the idea--and yet we also recognize that human behavior is sometimes highly resistant to direct, intentional control. Addictions and compulsions, for example, can overwhelm our best intentions. Legalistic notions of sin (like the pharisee's in the story) are simplistic and don't take into account the complexities of our nature.

What did Jesus understand about our complexity, our fragility? Probably a lot. What did he say about sin and forgiveness? This "*Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world*": what did he say? "*Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.*" "*Judge not, lest you be judged.*" "*Forgive each other seventy times seven times*". The pharisee in the story looks at the woman weeping at Jesus's feet and sees someone who broke the rules. Jesus looks at her and sees a human being in all her complexity and fragility.

If there's anything that comes through loud and clear in the New Testament, it's God's eagerness to forgive and God's eagerness for us to forgive each other. That's what the Cross is all about. The Lamb of God takes away the sin of the world. Jesus models a profligate generosity of spirit in his willingness to forgive. This same spirit draws us into the same expansiveness, into the same eagerness to forgive, into the same profligate generosity.

In Christ we're drawn toward a radical realignment, a radical reorientation. The Spirit of Truth draws us toward greater understanding of the human heart and mind using all the tools available to us today. It's perhaps not so surprising that modern behavioral studies lead us in the same general direction as Christ's own generosity of spirit.

Yes, we need rules and norms to live together, and we need to protect the weak from the strong and the peaceable from the violent. But even the sanctions and deterrents of the criminal justice system can be grounded in a spirit of generosity. Jesus was about resurrection, restoring to life. Restorative justice: mercy, not retribution.

Do you ever wonder what God must be thinking? Sometimes I imagine God pondering the human condition and shaking his head saying, “What was I thinking? It’s just too hard for them—they’ll never get it all right! I’d better give everybody a free pass.” There is a certain expansiveness in giving out free passes—and what could be more expansive than God?

The woman at Jesus’ feet got a free pass—she didn’t even have to ask. We can be so quick to judge. Maybe we ought to try giving out free passes and see how it feels. Even if we don’t really understand each other, it’s probably what we’d do if we did. It’s what Jesus would do. And in this same spirit of compassion and generosity, we might even give ourselves a free pass, at least once in a while.