

In the gospel reading this morning, a woman of notoriety crashed a dinner party where our Lord was a guest. There are some problems with the story, at least as Saint Luke conveys it. Luke, who became a disciple well after our Lord's crucifixion, was not an eyewitness to anything in the life of Jesus. In this case, Luke took a kernel from the oral tradition of the early church and wove it into his narrative. Even so, in his telling of the story, Luke teaches us something significant about humanity and Christian living. Pundits, over the years, have taken this story and spun it into a trite, but true and important saying, "The church is not a hotel for saints; rather, it is a hospital for sinners." When people forget this they find themselves in the same boat as the Pharisee in today's story, and it is not a boat that we should want to be in because it is in some danger of sinking.

Let's look at this story, for it tells us a great deal about what is expected of us when we claim to follow Jesus. Now, Luke doesn't tell us what the woman did to earn her the description of "sinner," but a good guess is that she was considered sexually wanton, given the extent of her notoriety. What ever she did, her lifestyle fell far short of the Jewish moral code; she was not the sort of woman a good Jewish mother would want for a daughter-in-law, and certainly not the type of woman a young, eligible single Jewish male, like Jesus, should be seen talking to.

Now the story is troubled in its telling. I told you that Luke took a kernel of the oral tradition and spun a narrative. Part of the trouble is that in reality a notorious woman of this type would never have gotten into the house of an honorable man like the Pharisee. So it may be that while Jesus might have had an encounter with this woman, it likely was under somewhat different circumstances. But literal accuracy here is not important. What is important St. Luke makes abundantly clear: Jesus did not judge her. Jesus did not condemn her. Jesus recognized her faith and her love for him, and he set her sins aside. By telling this story Luke helps us to learn a most important lesson in moral theology.

We know John 3:16 well. "God so loved the world that he sent his only Son, so that anyone that believes in him will have eternal life." We know that passage; at least anyone that has been involved in the church for any time at all knows that passage. It is, no doubt, the most famous and most quoted passage in all of Holy Scripture. What few of us seem to know, or fail to show that we know by our actions, is the verse that immediately follows in John's Gospel. I think that the verse that follows is just as important as John 3:16. John 3:17 tells us that God sent his Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but to save the world – the entire world. That does not mean that there is universal salvation. It does mean that God does not exclude anyone from his love and there is no litmus test for God's love. God loves, unconditionally. Our faith in Jesus opens us, allows us to receive God's forgiveness as a gift of grace. And grace, simply stated, is God's acted-out love.

This message is not contained in today's Gospel reading, alone. Unconditional love and grace through faith is the Gospel's consistent message. We find the message again and again in the stories of Jesus. One of the clearest and best is the story of our Lord and the woman caught in act of adultery. After challenging the crowd that would have stoned her, Jesus asked the woman, "What, has no one condemned you?" When she answered that no one had, Jesus said, "Neither do I. Go and sin no more."

The Gospel gives us no wiggle room here. If we would imitate Christ, we must love and forgive as he loves and forgives us. Today's story teaches us that, and it teaches us more. It very pointedly tells us that the "holier than thou" attitude that all of us from time to time display is decidedly out of place in Christian living. We know that it is rampant. We see it, day in and day out. Sometimes I think it is a disease, a virus of false piety to which we are all susceptible. The gospel lesson today tells us that trying to be "holier than thou" is just wrong. This was Christ's message to his Pharisaical host in the story today, when he told him the parable about the creditor with two debtors. Jesus finished that story by pointing out that the woman that the Pharisee condemned was worthier than the Pharisee himself was. Another time, Jesus told us that before we try to tack the speck out of someone's eye, we need to remove the log from our own. It is the same thing, and it is a good lesson to remember. If we want to be disciples of Jesus, we have to imitate Jesus. When we do, we and those around us receive the grace of our Savior's love.

*Amen.*