

SERMON – “Overwhelming Gratitude” – June 17, 2007
Text: Luke 7:36-50

Our scene in our Luke text is at the dinner table. The dinner table is an almost sacred place. It is a place where we say grace, it is a place where we invite people to eat with us and to share their lives with us. Inviting a person to dinner is letting a person in the family and sharing intimately with the people around the table. You daughter is dating a young man, when she says “Dad, can I invite Ted to lunch with us after church?” Your ears immediately perk up, What does this mean? This person is indeed important in my daughter’s life! Is this my future son-in-law?

The dinner table in a Jews home is a very religious occasion, like it is for many of our homes. In fact we get our custom of saying a blessing, grace before meals, from our Jewish heritage. When we say a blessing before eating, we claim the dinner table as a place of divine grace and revelation. “God is great, God is good, let us thank him for our food.” If you want to know God you don’t have to go to a mountain- top, or a beautiful chapel or cathedral, All you have to do to discover the love of God is to consider the food on your table.

Today’s gospel story puts us at the dinner table with Jesus. Jesus is a guest of a man named Simon, a religious person, A Pharisee who spends much of his day studying the Word of God and attempting to put his religion into practice in everyday life. You are invited to this dinner table as well.

Listen to this rendition of this scene by James Gilchrist writer for “The Christian Ministry” magazine that puts us at the dinner table with Simon, Jesus,

when the woman of the city makes an unexpected and according to Jewish social law inappropriate entrance to the dinner party.

“But Jesus knows what Simon is thinking, and Jesus, too, speaks obliquely. He says out loud, so the whole company can hear, ‘Simon I have something to say to you. There was a creditor who had two debtors. One owed him 50 days wages, the other owed him 500 days of wages. The creditor was a generous man, and when he found out that the debtors could not repay him, he forgave both their debts. Which of the debtors will love him more?’

“Well, I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debts. Simon says, wondering what the point is?

“You’re right’, says Jesus. Then he looks at the woman. Of course, everyone has been looking at her all along (except one man in the corner who was startled when she first walked in and has avoided eye contact ever since.) The women in the room are giving her that contemptuous ‘we know what you are’ look. The most religious of the men are indignant- not over what she is, but that she should appear so shamelessly in the company of God-fearing people. A couple of the men are still trying hard not to look at the dress.

“The woman knows they are all staring at her, and she knows what they’re thinking. Strangely enough, it doesn’t bother her. She’s hardened herself to their contempt, and she learned long ago to fling their insults right back at them.

“But Jesus has gotten to her. His is the only look that is neither leering nor contemptuous. There isn’t a name anyone has called her that she hasn’t called

herself a hundred times. But Jesus doesn't call her anything, except a child of God.

‘Jesus looks at the woman, but he speaks to the Pharisee, Simon. “You see this woman? I came to your house weary from the road, and you gave me no water for my feet; she washed my feet with her tears. You gave me no kiss of greeting; she kissed my feet. You gave me no anointing, as hosts do in honor of their guests; she anointed me with oil. Therefore, I tell you, her sins, though they are many, are forgiven. But the one to whom little is forgiven loves little,”

“Now there us quite a stir around the table. The fellow next to you leans over and asks, ‘Who is this who even claims to forgive sins?’ You came, like every one else, to check out Jesus, to see whether he meets your criteria for what a prophet ought to be. Now all of a sudden he is the judge. He speaks as if he can see right through everyone. And he's pronouncing a benediction (a blessing) upon this sinner. “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.”

“What's this: no prophetic rancor. Oh, how we love to see a sinner get what they deserve. A blessing? He's no prophet, for he can't see what this woman truly is. She deserves no blessing!

You're not the only one confused and angry. “Simon looks a bit rattled, if only because Jesus had the gall to point out his breach of etiquette. But Simon is smooth; he quickly recovers his pose and control.

“Then you look at Jesus again and think about what he said. It dawns on you that here are two debtors. One is a flaming sinner with a colossal debt. But she knows what she is, and when she meets someone who loves and forgives

her that seems to set her free and she is so full of grace and gratitude that she falls at his feet and worships him, and then gets up to serve him in love.

“The other debtor owes just a little. He’s kept most of the commandments, at least outwardly. He has done well in life, and he takes his prosperity as a sign of his virtue. He knows he’s not perfect, but then nobody is. He offers his general confession at worship, as everyone else does. But he has none of this woman’s gratitude because he doesn’t think there has been much to forgive. And because he lacks gratitude, he also lacks love.

“Now you look around at all the people in that room. You look again at Jesus. And you wonder to yourself, what kind of debtor am I? How do I respond to the grace of love and forgiveness poured over in my life? How do I respond to others with eyes of being better than they and that they deserve what they get. Or do I respond to this love and grace with humility and love, and welcome all to the Lord’s Table for they are as hungry as you.

In today’s gospel a woman, a “sinner”, shows great love for Jesus. Jesus tells a parable about the great joy felt by a debtor who was forgiven much. In a church the largest donor was a man who had come to the church late in life. He lived a dissolute life as a young man, became addicted to alcohol, and made poor judgments on living and generally made a real mess out of things. Then, in a dramatic encounter with Jesus, he was forgiven and freed from his past guilt.

As he put it, “When you have felt Jesus reaching down as he did to pick me up then you just can’t help being really thankful. That’s why I give.”

Those of us for whom Jesus has not had to make such a great reach, are we guilty of feeling less gratitude toward our life and God, or of objectifying people? In our current news today, Paris Hilton is a person whom we probably have all objectify, we assume we know her and we place her in our human condemned categories, but she is a child of God. This does not excuse her behavior but it dictates how we should speak of her. The good news is this. If you are guilty you are forgiven and loved. Now how do you respond to such love and grace?