

Pentecost 4C (6/12/2016)  
**2 Samuel 11:26-12:10, 13-15**  
 Psalm 32  
**Galatians 2:15-21**  
**Luke 7:36-8:3**

*Whose presence is intolerable to us? Who is the degenerate who is obviously unwelcome, who doesn't belong? We make immediate, often silent, and ultimately destructive judgments that mirror widely-accepted social norms, but Jesus resists those norms. He embraces each of us, regardless of our own unworthiness, with forgiveness and love. And, that's why we love him.*

One of my favorite works of religious art is a bronze sculpture of Jesus by Canadian artist, Timothy Schmalz. It's no standard depiction, though. The figure of Jesus is huddled under a blanket and lying on a park bench, his face and hands obscured, but his bare feet exposed and bearing the scars of crucifixion. It's the only feature that identifies him. Otherwise, he might be any other homeless person sleeping in public. "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head."<sup>1</sup> Jesus of Nazareth, the itinerant rabbi, is, in fact, homeless. But his portrayal as a homeless person reminds us that we also meet the living Christ in the least of these who are members of his family: the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, the captive;<sup>2</sup> in short, the poor to whom he is sent to bring good news.<sup>3</sup>

Not surprisingly, the sculpture has provoked mixed reactions. Its first reproduction in the United States was installed on the property of Saint Alban's Episcopal Church in Davidson, North Carolina, an affluent neighborhood outside of Charlotte. While some members of the community have expressed appreciation for

---

<sup>1</sup> Luke 9:58.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 25:35-40.

<sup>3</sup> Luke 4:18-21.

the sculpture's bold statement, others have insisted that it "demeans the neighborhood" or "creeps them out."<sup>4</sup> In a particularly noteworthy instance, one resident mistook the sculpture for an actual homeless person and promptly called the police from the safety of her vehicle.

Art and story have a way of shining a light on the darkness in our hearts, of uncovering our ugliest impulses. For instance, in our first reading from Second Samuel today, the prophet Nathan tells King David the parable of a rich man's cruel confiscation of a poor man's little lamb, stirring the king to righteous indignation: "As the LORD lives, the man who has done this deserves to die...!" But the illustration only serves to reveal David's own cruelty: "*You* are the man!" the prophet declares, "You have struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword, and have taken his wife to be your wife...." David's violent selfishness is exposed. "I have sinned against the Lord," he confesses.

We are good at pointing a finger at others, but not as good at turning that finger back at ourselves. Our Gospel from Luke today is a case in point. When an uninvited guest arrives at the dinner Simon the Pharisee hosts for Jesus, everyone is immediately aware of her reputation. Interpreters have often read her description – "a woman in the city, ...a sinner" – to mean that she is a prostitute, although there's no evidence of that in the text. We dwell on the specifics of sin, but what is important in this story is that her sin is apparent to the community – it's public, and she can't hide it. So, Simon immediately recoils from her presence and objects to Jesus' association with her. The righteous must not be tainted by the unrighteous.

---

<sup>4</sup> John Burnett, <http://www.npr.org/2014/04/13/302019921/statue-of-a-homeless-jesus-startles-a-wealthy-community>.

Notice that Simon doesn't voice his revulsion out loud, but says *to himself*: "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him – that she is a sinner."

And, Jesus reads his reaction. By contrast to Simon's failure to provide hospitality, he points out, the woman has performed humbly extravagant gestures of devotion toward him. "...her sins, which were many, have been forgiven," Jesus explains, "hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little." **Mercy, in other words, inspires deep gratitude and love. The person who does not believe he needs it, however, can neither appreciate mercy nor respond to it accordingly.**

But, before we condemn Simon the Pharisee or the woman who called the police on Jesus, we need to acknowledge our similarity to them. We also make immediate, often silent, and ultimately destructive judgments against others, usually strangers. Whose presence is intolerable to *us*? Who is the degenerate who is obviously unwelcome? Is she the scab-faced meth head? Is she the inappropriately-dressed and unruly teenager? Is she the disheveled vagrant sleeping on the church steps? **We give lip service to compassion, but who simply does not live up to acceptable standards in our eyes?**

Our judgments, like those of Simon and the concerned citizen of Davidson, North Carolina, reflect widely-accepted social norms, norms that we've internalized. So, our response is automatic<sup>5</sup>: "sinners," whoever they are, just don't belong. But

---

<sup>5</sup> See Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 310, 311.

Jesus resists those norms. **He sees the undesirable person while others turn away, he recognizes her sincerity, and he receives her with grace.**

What's more, Jesus undermines our self-righteousness with an illustration of his own: "A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he canceled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?" The parable makes a distinction between the size of the two debts, but notice that **both debtors rely completely on the creditor's forgiveness; neither of them can repay the debt.** In this way, Jesus deflects Simon's judgment back onto him. "*You are the man!*" he implies, "You have measured this woman's debt and forgotten your own. You have deemed her unworthy while remaining blind to your own unworthiness."

But not even Simon's pious arrogance can separate him from the love of God. In our second reading from Galatians today, Paul makes clear that **we do not stand or fall on our own goodness; we do not rest on our ability to live up to acceptable standards in God's eyes. No, we rest on the promise of grace that is manifest in Christ.** Paul puts it beautifully: "the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."

Dear church, the fact is that **we are all the woman weeping with gratitude at Jesus' feet. By his gracious welcome, we have all found a place at his table. By his immeasurable mercy, we have all been released from the burden of our debts. He embraces each of us, regardless of our own unworthiness, with forgiveness and love. And, that's why we love him.**