

Leacock Presbyterian Church, Paradise, PA
Richard E. Sindall, guest minister
Sunday, August 28, 2016
Lessons: Jeremiah 31:31-34 and Luke 7:36-50

SECOND CHANCE?

“Do you see this woman?” Let’s make that the question, because it is.

The good, highly religious and upright man has invited the controversial teacher to supper hoping to learn what sort of man the teacher really is. Some among the people have been calling him a prophet. Others among the religious elite suggest rather that he is a phony and even a blasphemer.

The good man watches as his guest removes his sandals then reclines with the others for the meal. As is the custom, he lies on his side supporting himself on his elbow and forearm. His feet are tucked behind him.

Suddenly a woman enters. Quietly except for muffled sobs she kneels behind the teacher. Seeing that her tears have fallen onto his feet, she wipes them away with her hair. Then she bends down to kiss his feet and anoint them with an expensive ointment she has brought. The teacher does not push the woman away or even scold her.

There, right there, the good man has his answer. If this teacher were indeed a prophet, he would not allow a woman to touch him, but especially not such a woman as this one. Does he not perceive the truth about her others see at a glance, or does he not care? Is he enjoying the attention? The good man sees that she is filthy, and now he has confirmation that the teacher is neither a prophet nor even a righteous man.

Have you no pride? We today might address that question to the woman who is humbling herself beyond our sense of decency. She’s kissing his dirty feet! But for the good man (his name is Simon), the question of lacking proper pride should be addressed, not to her, but to the teacher. In Simon’s eyes, she is not humiliating herself but defiling the man who tolerates her filthy touch. He, the teacher (we know him as Jesus), is the one doing something Simon finds disgusting. Jesus is defiling, not merely himself, but the name of God he claims to represent to the people.

Simon is thinking, “Do you not see this woman for what she is?” Then Jesus asks of Simon the good man, “Do you see this woman?”

So much revolves around that simple question. The true answer from the good man would be, “No,” but Simon believes he sees that woman very clearly and, in fact, much more clearly than this teacher he has in his home for evaluation. Simon’s purpose for inviting Jesus was not to learn from him but to size him up. Simon foregoes the usual welcoming customs because Jesus is not a respected guest and should not assume he is welcome.

As for the woman, does it even take a prophet to see her for what she is? No decent woman in that society would be touching a man not her husband or, at least, her brother and certainly not weeping over his feet and kissing them. To Simon, she is disgusting, and by permitting her to continue, Jesus is making himself disgusting also. The longer the situation plays out the more it validates Simon’s reservations about the so-called prophet, the teacher with the radical ideas about God and God’s will. If it is being said that Jesus is a prophet, it is being said also that he is a populist, a rabble rouser, undermining respect for God’s commandments, weakening the standards of virtue, and cheapening the life and hopes of God’s holy people.

Not just for Simon long ago but for the Simon in each of us, truth comes as the product of judgment, of measurement and evaluation, of comparison with the standards of goodness and merit. For our inner Simon, the truth about this woman is that she is a disgusting sinner, and that truth will come upon her at last as God’s punishment if she does not clean up her act. Truth will be served up when she is given what she deserves, as Simon himself hopes to be given what he believes he deserves. No, he does not imagine himself perfect. He’s human and knows it, and so he needs forgiveness. But for Simon, forgiveness is a second chance given to the person who has earned it by trying to do what is right.

A second chance sounds like a good deal, does it not? Yes, and it can be, unless nothing has changed in my circumstances or, even more importantly, in me. Unless my second chance is just another opportunity predictably to fail.

For Jesus, God’s truth is revealed, not in judgment, but in compassion. For him, understanding a person does not mean evaluating but, rather, empathizing. He entered into our humanity to share it, feel it, enjoy it, suffer it, and endure it all the way to death. I suspect this woman is beyond fear of humbling herself. Likely she has humiliated herself countless times with men. She does not fear losing the respect of her neighbors because she knows they have no respect for her. But now she has found something that has overwhelmed her: a man of God who does not look upon her with scorn or turn away in disgust. Is it possible God actually cares for her, wants her love, regards her as someone who matters? In Jesus, God became, not only present, but vulnerable to human beings. That’s what the Incarnation really means: not a thinly veiled deity ready to reveal power and glory but one who loves so much as to be willing to suffer and be put to shame. Jesus represents and

embodies the unrecognized and unexpected empathy and compassion of God for broken and shamed people.

For the Simon in us, forgiveness may be just a second chance or even a concession, but to Jesus forgiveness is the healing of the soul – the very person I am in the depths of my being me. If I think forgiveness is just an excusing of my fault, then I have not yet gotten it. If I imagine forgiveness to be God’s way of fudging my record, then maybe I’m still trying to make a deal with God for my own security. No, forgiveness is the healing that changes life by changing us, restoring us for relationship with God, other people, and our true selves.

Think about the puppet parable I presented for the children. Max was a throwaway dog who was left, not only without a home, but with no regard for himself and no hope for his future but perhaps to die so the pain would stop. Then he is adopted out of a shelter by a family of people who love him, who want him in their home, and who care that he has a good life he can enjoy living. Max is not given a second chance to be a good dog; he is transformed into a loved dog. Max now needs to learn, not merely how to act, but how to feel loved, trust his people, and be the new Max. No wonder he is the most feeling and understanding, the most empathic, forgiving, and compassionate character among the puppets. Like many people, he knows how it feels to be rejected and thrown away.

There is, however, a second chance Jesus offers someone. The woman does not need a second chance. More like Max, she needs a real first chance she probably never had, and it’s not a chance to live up to the standards of the good people but an opportunity to be loved and respected, to be valued, and to have someone to trust. No, the person who needs a second chance is Simon the good man. His sense of his own goodness has led him to dismiss empathy and compassion. He sees life as a matter of reward or punishment, of deserving or undeserving. He does not empathize; he evaluates. He does not welcome Jesus but sizes him up. Simon is not vulnerable because he knows, and his knowledge of right and wrong, of good and evil, protects him from the vulnerability of compassion. So, he is able to sit back and evaluate this teacher who so appeals to the people who never before cared much about religion. Jesus is giving the good man another chance to know God and so to see his neighbor and himself in a new way that is healing for his calcified soul. Jeremiah says the people will learn to know God by being forgiven. That’s the good man’s second chance, if only he will soften his heart and take it.

The truth of God comes not when we are judged, although judgment may open our eyes if we need them opened and awaken us to our need for healing; God’s truth comes upon us when we are healed. Not verdict but welcome. Not reward or punishment but love. Not condemnation or vindication either but hope. Not the superiority of the virtuous but the community of the forgiven. Amen.