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## *Your Faith Has Saved You*

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### **Homily for Proper 6**

**13 June 2010**

**The Cathedral of St. Philip, Atlanta**

**The Rev. Canon Todd Smelser, Preacher**

Our Gospel lesson this morning tells a story of two contrasting characters—Simon the Pharisee and an unnamed woman. Simon has invited Jesus to his home for dinner. Most likely a large dining table graces the room, surrounded by couches for reclining guests. Jesus is there as is the second character in the story: an uninvited woman. Weeping, she bends down to bathe Jesus' feet with her tears, to dry them with her hair, and to anoint them. We never hear her speak, but her tears as well as her actions speak volumes. They reveal a woman filled with grief that chooses a path of extreme humility born of a deep yearning.

Simon speaks little as well, but the narrator permits us to hear his inner thoughts as he watches the woman and Jesus, and these thoughts reveal a man closed to people who don't meet his standards. He sits in secret judgment of both the woman and Jesus, confident of his own prejudice. How could Jesus be a prophet of God if he allows this sinful woman to touch him?

Earlier in the Gospel, the rich details of Luke's storytelling help us imagine the sight of the crowds, the dust of the road, and the smells of the vendors selling food. In earlier verses in this chapter Jesus responded to another outsider, a centurion, by healing his slave from a distance. At his next stop he risked touching the ritually unclean coffin at a funeral to respond to a grieving widow by raising her son to life. The message seems clear: the presence of God with us is good news for all people—the powerful Roman soldier and his powerless slave, and the suffering widow and her restored son. And now God's graciousness is given to this sinner who was considered unworthy to be in Jesus' presence. She becomes the forgiven one who is exalted for her faith.

In the Gospel account of Jesus' ministry he casts an ever-widening net to catch the people of God. In doing so, he changes the rules of the game. The angel in Luke's birth narrative proclaimed "See—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all people." Jesus lives out this grand pronouncement by drawing a circle around people who were previously standing at the margins, drawing them inside.

Of course, not everyone thought this new inclusionary vision was good news. The Pharisee who had invited Jesus to dinner rudely ignores common practices of hospitality, denying the road-weary Jesus a basin in which to wash or a towel to dry his feet. As is so often the case in the Gospels, the truth sneaks up on us. We do not really know what sin lies in the woman's heart, what shame has reduced her to. We only know that her love for Jesus and her sorrow for his coming trial become emblematic of her faith. Through her compassionate act of generosity in bathing his feet with her tears and drying them with her hair, she demonstrates abundant love. Her love for Jesus becomes the sign of God's extravagant love for all of us.

Like the foot-washing part of the Maundy Thursday liturgy, we would prefer to keep this embarrassing love at a distance, but Jesus will have none of it. Interestingly the Greek word for sinner that Luke uses for this woman is the same word that Simon Peter uses when he fell down before Jesus saying "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man." Simon Peter's sin is not named, nor is the sin of the woman with the alabaster jar. The woman joins the company of us all who want to serve

Jesus. Though broken and flawed like Peter, she becomes a means of grace for the glory of God.

This text pushes us to look at pride and humility today, in an age that continues teaches to stress the values of individualism and self-reliance. Simon has social standing and status and certain kind of moral rectitude. In his eyes, he is a righteous man. In contrast to Simon, the unnamed woman puts aside all worries about honor and shame, appearance and reputation, in order to find Jesus, and the healing that she desires. She come uninvited into the company of men and tenderly cares for Jesus, whose forgiveness permits us to understand her grief as repentance, almost like a prodigal daughter. But Simon, so caught up in his own ego and righteousness, is entirely untouched by this homecoming which takes place under his own roof. He is blind to his own debts and his own need of forgiveness.

One of the early monastic leaders who thought deeply about humility and its significance in our lives was St. Benedict. Benedictine sister and author Joan Chittister writes that the Rule of St. Benedict teaches that humility is the realization that "human limitation is the gift that relates us to God, to the world, to the self, and to others. Pride drives a wedge between us and reality; humility is its glue." The first of St. Benedict's twelve principles of humility is the most important, for it creates the foundation of one's entire way of life in community: "the awareness of God, at all times, in all places, at the center of all things." This awareness permits us to learn, Sister Joan writes, that God "is not a goal to be reached: God is a presence to be recognized." This principle is what reorients our lives from self to other and to God. In all things we live out of the humility that comes in recognizing God's presence among us.

We seem to live in a time in which humility is in very short supply. Everyone seems to have the answers and the blame to place at those who may disagree with them. We vilify our leaders and rise up a kind of frontier individualism as the norm. No longer are we really our brothers and sisters keepers. We seem to stand ready to cast the first stone at all of those who are seem to be the greatest sinners. Perhaps like Simon the Pharisee, we see ourselves as righteous, standing a little taller than those around us. But Jesus ministry in the Gospels is not about placing blame, or about stroking those who seem to be o.k. It is about breaking the cycle of public ridicule, of violence, the power of addiction, or covetousness, as in the behavior of King Ahab in our first reading. Jesus offers forgiveness and acceptance that lifts the heavy burden of shame, allows the forgiveness of self, and offers the freedom of authentic life lived in love and gratitude.

The Episcopal Church that I have served for more than 36 years is certainly not a perfect church. Sometimes we are slow to act and other times we make big decisions too quickly. We offer beautiful worship to God but neglect opportunities to tell our own faith stories. We still feel a bit top-down in our decision making processes, and are still afraid of conflict. But when it comes to having a monopoly on the truth, most of the church is humble enough to realize that we can only point the way to others about our understanding of God's mercy and love, sharing our own experiences of God's forgiveness and grace. Unlike so many of our religious kin, we do not pretend to fully know God's plan for the world, or even for our own lives. And that's why we keep coming back here to church""to discern God's will in our lives, so that we might actually help transform the world with the kind of forgiving compassion and forgiveness that Jesus showed to this unnamed woman in the story.

If you have come to church today with a heavy burden, or with a shamed heart, or with a bruised spirit, come forward and lay it on the altar so that our Lord can forgive your sins, and restore value and worth to your life. Receive the bread and wine of Eucharist with open hands and an open heart, and be filled with hope and promise. And may you hear Jesus words spoken to you: "Your sins are forgiven and your faith has saved you: go in peace."