



Sermons from Northwood United Church

"New-found Faith: Confessions of a Cradle Christian"

Luke 7:36-8:3

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May the words of my mouth, the meditations of our hearts, and the actions of our lives be acceptable in your sight O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

So there was an Anglican minister speaking on evangelism at a college graduation in the Episcopal church in the states. During the ceremony he had a fascinating conversation with a young man from California who said he was skeptical about the likelihood of his church getting involved in evangelism. Much like United Church people, he didn't even like the "E" word because it had connotations of the worst of manipulative religion.

"I have only evangelized one person in my whole life."

"Tell me about it," said the preacher.

"I was on my first date with this woman. Things were going well. The conversation- the restaurant- all great. As the evening wore on she said, "Hey, it's getting late. Do you want to go to my place or yours?" The poor guy wasn't sure what she was suggesting, but he had a pretty good idea, and he was speechless. He sputtered around for a bit until finally saying, "We're just getting to know each other. This is our first date. I don't do this on a first date!"

Well that opened a whole new and interesting area of conversation in which he had a hard time talking about sexuality at all let alone why he had such strongly held beliefs and values around sex. It was hard to explain. Eventually all he could think of to say was, "Well, I don't know. I'm an Episcopalian!"

"What's that?" she asked.

"It's a church, a kind of Christian." She didn't know the first thing about the church- had never been in one in her life. He told her a little bit about his church and she asked if she could go with him one day. They went together the next Sunday, and to his utter amazement, she loved it! She kept coming. Three weeks after first darkening the door, she asked the priest if she could take instruction towards making a profession of faith, and becoming a member.

"Is she still going to church?" asked the preacher.

"Oh ya! She thinks she invented the Episcopal church. She's there every time the door opens. Loves it. She never fell in love with me but she sure fell in love with Jesus." And then this guy said something very interesting. He said, "I'm one of those cradle Episcopalians. I've been to church for as long as I can remember. Do you think that has something to do with why she is so excited about the faith and I am so... well, unexcited?"

Have you ever noticed how sometimes this is the way it works: people who are new to the faith can be so excited, ask the best most penetrating questions, be so very irritating to us old timers? And sometimes people who have grown up in the faith can make you wonder why they bother, or whether it means much to them anymore? I have a friend who is a cradle Catholic who says there's nothing worse than a convert. They are just so idealistic- they take it all so seriously, like that's a bad thing. The freshness of new-found faith that is rooted in gratitude for forgiveness, and mercy.

Jesus is having dinner at the home of Simon, a cradle Pharisee. Of course he is. Respected Rabbi eating at the home of core faithful. And in slips a woman who has recently come in contact with Jesus. We are not given any of that story- only that she was a woman with a

reputation, a sinner and everyone knew it. So when she slips in among the respectable, the theological, the ones who keep this faith going, and is sitting there behind Jesus, weeping at Jesus' feet, touching him, passionate in her gratitude for his simple acceptance of her, Simon is aghast. It's improper, unseemly, undignified! Doesn't he have any shame, any self-respect, any dignity?

But Jesus' response is firstly to briefly offer a parable about how significant it is to someone who has been judged so much to be loved so simply. How profound and life-changing it is to be shown a little respect, a little patience, a little unconditional regard.

What got her on the path of the Way of Jesus with such passionate gratitude was the experience of being loved not just regardless of mistakes, inadequacies, bad habits, but love in the midst of them. She had become so identified in her community with the brokenness in her life that she ceased to think of herself as someone who had failed, but someone who was a failure. And when people looked at her, including good faithful cradle Jews like Simon, they saw the failures, and they identified her with the them. They did not see a human being who had sinned but they saw a sinner- a lost cause. They might as well have said, "Jesus, don't bother. She's not worth it."

Jesus asks Simon, "Do you see this woman?" Do you see this human being behind the years of struggle? Do you see the precious soul struggling for breath beneath the layers of stigma and judgement lain upon her? Can you see the soul at work behind the eyes? Can you see her humanity? Can you see her through the eyes of God's mercy? When Jesus looks at her through the eyes of God's mercy he sees a struggling beautiful broken human being, and to be looked at that way is to be forgiven, shown mercy, and given life again.

And when seen in that light, regarded in that way, the tears flow. Her tears then are tears of relief that finally someone can see her. Her tears are tears stored up over the years of having to hold yourself together when you are such an object of shame. Her tears are tears of regret for all the time wasted grappling with a community that could not or would not accept her. Her tears come pouring out because someone has not forgotten she too is a human soul, a child of God, a daughter of Abraham as much in line for God's love and mercy as the most faithful Pharisee- the most dyed in the wool cradle Christian.

Today we celebrate a transition in the lives of some young people, Addy, Nicole, heading out into the post-high school world. And we pronounce a blessing upon the life of a child, Lucas. And we can see the freshness, the newness of life in them. And we know that the world and life includes struggles, brokenness, mistakes, hurts. We hope these people will be spared such things, but we know it happens. So in the midst of it, this is our prayer. "Dear God Nicole, Addy, Lucas, in them we see and experience your goodness and light. As they move forward in their lives, protect and uphold them, guide them, heal them when they are broken. Reach into their heart and stay there- that they will always know that you see them, and love them, that you will never let them go, that they belong to you. Amen.