

Luke 7:36-8:3

DO YOU SEE?

Fred Craddock tells of visiting a small church and being surprised at the appearance of a large pastor – 6’4” and 300 pounds. The pastor’s most noticeable feature was his stumbling, lumbering gait. He was awkward. His head was misshapen. His hair was askew. He stumbled up the steps to get to the pulpit. “When he turned to face us,” Craddock said, “I saw the thick glasses, so that when he read, he held the book near his nose. He read 1 Corinthians 13 and spoke on the greatness of love. He wasn’t poetic or prophetic, but he was warm and affectionate. The relationship between those people, and the love that came back from those people who sat quietly, leaning forward, was captivating and I was captured. How could this grotesque creature be so full of love? Is this the providence of God that grants people who lack attractiveness on the outside to have that quality on the inside?”

“After the service, I lingered at the door and listened to the greetings and little words of pastoral care and comfort between him and the members. One woman I would guess to be seventy shook his hand at the door and said, ‘I wish I could know your mother.’ He said, ‘My mother’s name is Grace.’” A few minutes later, Craddock remarked to the pastor, “That was an unusual response you gave to that woman, ‘My mother’s name is Grace.’” The pastor explained: “When I was born I was put up for adoption at the Department of Family Services. As you can guess, nobody wanted to adopt me. So I went from foster home to foster home, and when I was about seventeen I saw some young people going into a church. I so wanted some friends, so I went in, and there I met grace – the grace of God.” (Brett Younger) In today’s Gospel lesson, at some previous point in time, the woman had met the grace of God in Jesus and had experienced the forgiveness of her sins. Whether it was Jesus’ teachings, or his warm and inviting demeanor, or his compassionate acceptance of her (or all three!), the woman had repented of her sins and was immediately set free from her past and reconciled to God and others.

Her profound sense of gratitude moved her to do the unexpected. She quietly slipped into Simon the Pharisee’s home, went to the place where Jesus reclined at the table, and began to tenderly anoint Jesus’ feet with an expensive jar of perfume. As she did so, she wept and dried her tears from Jesus’ feet with her hair. She also kissed his feet and continued to rub the ointment on Jesus’ feet.

Simon was appalled by both the woman’s actions as well as Jesus’ inaction. Simon couldn’t believe that Jesus simply allowed this woman, this sinner, to touch him and did nothing at all to stop her. To Simon’s way of thinking, Jesus must not be a prophet if he couldn’t see the woman for what she was. But, of course, Jesus knew the woman’s past - just like he knew what Simon was thinking about him at that moment.

Thus, Jesus posed a possible scenario and question to Simon: “Two men were in debt to a banker. One owed five hundred dollars and the other owed fifty. And, since neither one could pay off his debt, the banker forgave both debts. Which of the two would be more grateful?” Simon correctly answered the one who was forgiven the most.

Then, Jesus turned to the woman while speaking to Simon and said, “Do you see this woman? You invited me to your home, and yet you showed me no hospitality. You didn’t provide water for my feet; you neglected to give me the kiss of peace; and, you failed to anoint my head with oil. All of these gestures are basic signs of welcome in our culture, yet you failed to extend these courtesies to me, while she has gone out of her way to express her joy and

gratitude towards me.” Truth be told, the woman was more of a host than you were, Simon!” Then, Jesus drove home the point of his brief parable of the two debtors: “Her many sins have been forgiven, and so, she has shown extravagant love. On the other hand, if your forgiveness is minimal, your gratitude is slight.” Then Jesus told the woman that her sins were forgiven, her faith had saved her, and she could go and live in the very peace of God.

“Simon,” Jesus asked, “Do you see this woman?” And, it is immediately clear that Simon really didn’t see the woman at all. In part, he only saw her for what she had been and done. He didn’t, he couldn’t, see her for the woman she had become by the grace of God. Even more, it becomes evident that Simon’s focus was on himself and not on the woman. Simon also saw himself, in part for he didn’t recognize the sin within himself and his very own need for God’s forgiveness. Simon was a Pharisee, who struggled greatly to keep the Law and be righteous before God. However, whereas God intended for the Law to help people get along and get together with God and neighbor, the Pharisees misunderstood that fact and emphasized that the Law should keep people apart. The word Pharisee means: “those who are separated.” The Pharisees separated themselves from the rest of the people in their attempt to stay pure.

By contrast, the woman, who was a sinner, met God’s grace and mercy head on, and was changed forever. Having been forgiven by Jesus, she was immediately brought back into relationship with God and others. Then, having experienced God’s forgiveness, she began to serve Jesus and, more than likely, other people. Her forgiveness gushed forth in gratitude and in service to God and others.

Jesus urged Simon to have a change of heart and to truly see this woman. Simon himself could do with a total change, an extreme makeover, a complete transformation, like the woman. He needed to forego his own self-righteousness, which caused him to stand apart and judge people. Simon needed to undergo a life-changing experience that would, in turn, bring him even closer to God and lead him to participate in other peoples’ lives.

The good news in this story (for us) is that Jesus associates with and eats with sinners, including you and me. And yet, he won’t allow us to remain the same. He helps us to see ourselves as we are and to see ourselves, by the grace of God and with the help of the Holy Spirit, in terms of what we can become. Then, Jesus gives us the gift of sight to really take notice of other people, and, in grateful response to our being forgiven, to give of ourselves to them.

Dr. William Willimon tells of a woman in his church. Every day on her way to work she encountered a man standing on the street corner in tattered clothes, with his hand out, seeking money. “When I first went to work there, I noticed him. But some months later, when one of my coworkers said to me, ‘You know that old man that stands on the corner, every day, begging?’ I said, ‘But he isn’t there anymore, is he? He used to be there, but now he’s gone.’ My coworker insisted that he was still there. The next morning on my way to work, I was shocked to see the old man standing there on the corner, just as he had always been, with his hand out. He had not moved or gone away. Yet, I no longer noticed him... I had grown accustomed to not seeing him in my mind.

“The next day when I walked to work I left home a bit early, and I stood there and talked to the man for the first time. I found out that he was down on his luck, that he had once worked near that very street corner, and a lot of other information. At the end of our conversation, I opened my pocketbook and pulled out a ten-dollar bill, but he wouldn’t take it. He said, ‘It was just good to talk to you this morning. That’s the best thing that you can give me.’ I believe that God sent that man to me to make me better at seeing people.”

The Holy Spirit helps us to “see” this woman or that man and to act accordingly, to give as we have received. When we see ourselves (in the light of God’s grace) as forgiven people, then we are enabled and empowered to see others and their needs as well, and we are able to respond with gratitude to God and compassion for them.

This past week I was one of the recipients of a mass e-mail letter to Grace Network supporters. Our church, along with many other churches and individuals, made it possible during the past eleven months to help feed 1,052 households, which represent 2,182 individuals with over 52,300 units of food. You see, forgiven people give to others. Next Saturday, many of us will gather on the front lawn of the church and extend hospitality to folks in our community, who will join us for a meal and fellowship. After all, forgiven people give to others. Later in the month, eleven of our youth and six of our adults will join with others from our sister church, Forest Hills Presbyterian, to reach out to and serve the people of Brunswick and New Hanover Counties in North Carolina. Once again, forgiven people give to others, especially those in need. Do you see? May God forgive us whenever we see and judge another person, or fail to see others, or fail to see our own sins and our own need of God’s grace and forgiveness. May God’s Spirit help us to not only look but to be observant; then, may we both receive God’s grace and pass it on to another person. When we fail and do not see the other person, we miss out on community with others and fellowship with God.

I want to close by telling you this story, which you have heard several times before. However, it contains the gospel truth, so, “let those who have ears, hear!”

An old rabbi once asked his pupils how they could tell when the night had ended and the day had begun. “Could it be,” asked one of his students, “when you see an animal in the distance and can tell whether it’s a sheep or dog?” “No,” answered the rabbi. Another asked, “Is it when you can look at a tree in the distance and tell whether it’s a fig tree or a peach tree?” “No,” answered the rabbi. “Then when is it?” the pupils demanded. “It is when you can look on the face of any man or woman and see that it is your brother or your sister. Because if you cannot see this, it is still night.”

Let us continue to live as Jesus’ faithful disciples and to serve and give with gratitude to others – all to the glory of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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