

*A baptismal meditation delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Pentecost 4, Proper 6, June 16, 2013, dedicated to Victoria Rose and Tiana Rae Daines on their baptismal day, to my children for putting up with me as their dad, ☺, for my wife's father, Robert Sitler, who died too young 40 years ago this month, for my dad as he begins his 90<sup>th</sup> year of life, and for all fathers everywhere, and always to the glory of God!*

## **“Unconditional Love and Forgiveness”**

### **Galatians 2:15-21; Luke 7:36-8:3**

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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Forgiveness. It is a word we believe in but in reality we struggle daily to fully embody. You and I want forgiveness for the sins we commit – for our words that wound, for the spirit within each of us which seeks to hurt others and for any of our wayward ways. But at the same time we struggle to forgive others for the things they do and say.

**Jesus was altogether different.** Forgiveness was at the heart of this man from Nazareth. It was in his DNA. In *Jesus Before Christianity*, Albert Nolan writes: *John the Baptist preached to sinners. Hanina ben Dosa exorcised evil spirits from them. But Jesus **identified** with them. He went out of his way to mix socially with beggars, tax collectors and prostitutes.* (p. 45)

In a society where you did not mix with those who were different than you in class, race or other status groups, and where

there was a major taboo in doing so, Jesus sought out and went into the homes of people. He loved to eat – with others! He was absolutely scandalous in accepting people and approving of them and associating with them. He actually wanted to **be friends** with tax collectors, beggars and sinners (Matthew 11:19). The effect on those who had been cast out was absolutely miraculous (Ibid).

In today's Gospel lesson, Jesus is eating with a Pharisee (you know the leaders of the synagogues who were famous for loving the laws of Moses). It would be like a conservative fundamentalist Christian inviting a good UCC member to dinner – something you don't see every day. If Jesus wasn't here, he could be accused of "reverse prejudice" – you know eating with sinners but not with righteous Jews. Anyway . . .

Into the Pharisee's home comes a "sinful woman of the city." She carries an alabaster jar of oil and she washes Jesus' feet with her tears and dries them with her hair. There is a lot wrong with this picture from the host's point of view. This woman is not welcome in his home. How did the woman get in? He is worried about the shame she will bring to his pure household. While he is getting undone, she is doing what the host should have done – washing the feet of his guest – as was common in this time. In other words, she is the true welcoming presence in this household through her actions at the feet of Jesus.

Jesus points out that this woman who has sinned a lot is now unconditionally loved and forgiven. She shows true faith by her actions of mercy and hospitality. In fact, we read that her faith saves her!

The effects of her actions carry over into the next section of scripture. Other women begin to follow Jesus and the miraculous festival of forgiveness grows. Not only that, we read that they are women of resources who support the Jesus movement.

Do you see what is going on? Forgiveness is contagious. The true miracle of forgiveness is that it grows and spreads and becomes the way and the truth of God.

Henri J.M. Nouwen has written: *Forgiveness is the name of love practiced among people who love poorly. The hard truth is that all people love poorly. We need to forgive and be forgiven every day, every hour increasingly. That is the great work of love among the fellowship of the weak that is the human family.*

In other words, when you forgive, you love someone. And when you love someone, God's light shines on you and through you to others and gives you the chance to be forgiving. This is what Jesus calls us to do. He calls us to love and to forgive. In forgiving we grow in love. In loving we open ourselves up to become forgiving.

Years ago, my professor of Bible, Brevard Childs told our "Introduction to the Hebrew Bible Class" that our job was to give people the word of God. He put this way: *Long after you are dead and gone, people will not remember your cute stories or funny jokes or edgy analogies and antadotes. But they will remember the Word of God. So give them the word of God.*

So let me break this down - the word of God for you today from Jesus, God's beloved son and Savior is about love and forgiveness. Speaking of the sinful woman of the city, he says: *I tell you, her sins, which were many were forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.* Speaking to her, he says, *You are forgiven. . . . Your faith has saved you, go in peace.*" (Luke 7:35-36)

On this Father's Day, when you may be carrying around all sorts of stuff about what has gone wrong in your life, I encourage you to walk with God and get things right in your life - to enter more deeply into love and forgiveness.

I close with the thoughts of one of the world's great fathers, Nobel Peace Prize winner Bishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa. He delivered these words as his nation was going through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, in which the perpetrators of the evil horrors of apartheid in South Africa had to come face to face with their victims and answer for their sins. Bishop Tutu said:

*People are often unreasonable and self-centered. Forgive them anyway.*

*If you are kind, people may accuse you of ulterior motives. Be kind anyway.*

*If you are honest, people may cheat you. Be honest anyway.*

*If you find happiness, people may be jealous. Be happy anyway.*

*The good you do today may be forgotten tomorrow. Do good anyway.*

*Give the world the best you have and it may never be enough. Give your best anyway.*

*For you see, in the end, it is between you and God. It was never between you and them anyway.*

The Gospel of Luke tells us that Jesus went out from the Pharisee's home going through villages and cities proclaiming and bringing good news of the kingdom of God. May you go out and bring good news of God's kingdom to those in your life and the strangers you meet on the way. Love and forgive. Forgive and love. In the face of opposition and resistance, do it anyway. Amen.

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