

“The Flow of Gratitude”

June 17, 2006

Galatians 2:15-21

Luke 7:36-8:3

This is the last Sunday I'll be standing up here until the end of July. Next week, Tyler and I will be attending the United Church of Christ's General Synod and 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary celebration in Hartford, Connecticut. Then, for the next four Sundays after that, I'll be on vacation.

So I'll be gone for five Sundays in a row. It seems like such a long stretch of time. I'll miss you. I'll miss your singing, your laughter, your tears, your stories, and your beautiful faces. ... I'll miss you, but, of course, I'll also enjoy having some time off!

This last week, as I prepared for today's service, I started wondering if I've been unconsciously trying to push you toward being *glad* that I'm going to be gone for the next five Sundays. I started this wondering as I reflected on last Sunday's sermon and as this morning's sermon began to emerge.

Those of you who were here last Sunday may remember that I had a good bit to say about money, and money seems to be known, far and wide in clergy circles, as one of the top things congregations *don't* want to hear about from the pulpit. Now I, personally, think of you as an exceptional congregation, and I continue to tell most everyone who will listen that I think you're an exceptional congregation. But, still, I wouldn't be surprised to learn that you share this apparently widespread congregational dislike of money sermons!

That was last Sunday, and today ...? In today's service, we have Paul being Paul, dying to the law by being crucified with Christ, and we have an unnamed woman, extravagantly and emotionally anointing Jesus with ointment. That combination might not be so bad in itself, although both Paul and a high level of emotion aren't especially popular in many progressive Christian churches these days. But it wasn't so much Paul and the unnamed woman who led me to wonder if I'm trying to alienate you before I leave for several weeks. It was, instead, the realization that I needed to preach about sin this morning.

I may have some doubts about whether a sermon dealing with money pushes any of your buttons, but I have no doubt that the subject of sin is a button pusher of unrivaled proportions. And I have no doubt because several of you have told me just how strongly (and negatively) you react to that three letter word. You've told me in some very subtle, nuanced ways and in some no-holds-barred ways.

Yet, despite all the baggage the word has and despite its history of being used as a weapon to wound and even kill people who don't meet someone else's expectations, sin remains a fundamentally important part of a life of faith. It's a *reality* we have to grapple with if we want to see ourselves *and God* clearly.

So, in hopes that I *won't*, in fact, leave you this morning looking forward to my absence, let me start with what sin is *not*. As I use the word, sin is not some horrible stain at the root of our very being. It is not some overwhelming flaw or some unrelenting ugliness that leaves us so repellant to God that God had to torture and kill "his" only son to make it possible to forgive us. Sin is not something that erases the fact that we are beloved creations of a gracious God.

If those are some of the things sin *isn't*, what, then, is it? The Greek word that's translated as "sin" in both of this morning's passages is "amartia," and perhaps more than anything else, "amartia" has connotations of missing the mark. If we start there, sin has to do with being pointed in the wrong direction, perhaps not focused on the right target in what we do and how we live our lives. With that definition in mind, being sinners no longer means being miserable worms who deserve everlasting damnation; it means being human beings who periodically lose our way.

Many people have found the idea of sin as missing the mark or being off target deeply healing as they've tried to unlearn the abusive, demeaning understandings of sin and sinner that have been used against them. It's a definition of sin that most of us can recognize as something applies to us. We can recognize our failures ... our failures to be as patient or loving or grateful as we want to be. We can recognize our failures and then see them, not as something that makes us shameful and hopeless, but as something that simply makes us people in need of redirection, refocus, or a re-aim.

The problem or, really, the shortcoming with understanding sin as missing the mark, is that it leaves one vital question unanswered: what, pray tell, is the "mark" or the "target" at which we're aiming? If we give ourselves the target of being better behaved than Tony Soprano or the chef on the TV show *Hell's Kitchen*, well, a good number of us might not have to worry about being sinners ever again.

But I don't think any of us are here this morning because we want to set our sights so low that we'll always be able to make the grade. Sure, we'll probably all have days when we want a free pass, times when the simple act of getting through the day without having someone killed or bringing someone to tears with curses and insults is good enough. But I think we all want more than that; I think we all want a more joyful, more abundant life than that.

So what is the mark? What's the target we're aiming for in our daily lives and in our life as a whole? If we seek to follow in the ways and footsteps of Jesus, the mark is not an easy one to hit. The mark that Jesus sets before us through his life and ministry sets a challenging standard, and his crucifixion warns us that as we get closer to that mark, we become more and more threatening to the status quo and the powers that be. As we open ourselves to the man of Nazareth and the living Christ of faith, we come to know that through Jesus God asks far more of us than to be nice to everyone and to live peaceable, contented lives. Never, ever forget that if Jesus taught and lived nothing more than the Golden Rule, no one – not the religious authorities nor the Roman rulers nor anyone else – would have felt the need to execute him.

This challenging, threatening mark that God sets before us in Christ is what Paul describes as "dying to the law" in this morning's reading, so that sin is living according to the dictates of whatever "the law" is in our lives. In Paul's life, the law had been the organizing principle at the center of everything. It provided a purpose. It gave him meaning, and, perhaps more than anything else, it gave him the assurance that he was a righteous, upstanding, and superior man.

Then the day came when Paul encountered a different truth about God, a truth that Paul saw in what he described as the "scandal" of Jesus' death. In the crucifixion, Paul encountered, not a triumphant God, not a God who is powerful in the ways that the world and the law consider powerful, but a God who was visibly present in the betrayed, humiliated, crucified Jesus. In Jesus, Paul encountered and was transformed by a God

who acts in the world through self-giving love. And so, in Jesus, Paul found the mark toward which he sought to direct his life. In the Jesus of self-giving love, Paul found who and what he wanted to follow and aim for.

For Paul, the law had been the way to earn God's favor and blessing, but it was so demanding that it was simultaneously the way to be a failure, a sinner. For Paul, the law was an instrument for drawing lines between people and nations, so that some were God's favored ones and others were unclean and disfavored. As Paul embraced it, the law had become the cause of sin, not freedom from sin.

If you want to see what functions as the same kind of law in contemporary American culture, I'd suggest looking at commercial television for a while. There, we will discover that acquiring things – luxury cars, the latest cellphone, the coolest clothes, the flashiest jewelry, and the best hair coloring – and having great sex are two of the best ways to earn, maybe not *God's* favor and blessing, but our own sense of favor and blessing. Like the law in Paul's time, the law of contemporary culture draws lines between the "righteous" and the "unrighteous," except the current language may describe the two groups as the haves and the have nots, the winners and the losers.

If you want to see what functions as "the law" in your own life, go deep into your heart and ask, what is it that I think will finally make me "good enough"? Is it the stuff of stuff – cars, houses, gadgets, clothes, vacations? Or is it losing weight ... getting the "right" job ... making a bigger difference in the world ... being the perfect parent or child or friend? What ultimately unattainable, unlimited goal is at the center of your life, trapping you in never being or doing enough? Whatever it is, that's the law, that's the sin to which Paul urged those early Christians to die. That's what Paul urges us to die to and leave behind, so that we can live to God. As Paul recognizes, if we live to God, we may still sin, we may still miss the mark, but Paul had also learned that in God we are held in a love that is larger than any of our failings ... a love that is always refining and retuning our aim.

That's the love that the unnamed woman in this morning's gospel reading must have encountered in Jesus. He had been teaching and challenging people in Nazareth and Nain, in Capernaum and other cities throughout Judea. He claimed that he had been sent to bring good news to the poor and to proclaim release to the captives. He preached the challenging path of loving your enemies, doing good to those who hate you, and blessing those who curse you. And everywhere he went, he brought healing and the good news of forgiveness.

The gospel of Luke calls the woman in this morning's story "a sinner." As is true of so many women mentioned in the New Testament, the word we hear from the early Christian tradition is that her sin was sexual in nature. (Sometimes, I think the early church fathers were as obsessed with sex as contemporary American culture is!) But perhaps her "sin" was being trapped in her sense of the law. She may have been trapped in believing that she could never measure up, that she was hopeless, that the lies people told about her – whatever they were – were true. She may have simply become convinced that she was unloved and unlovable, and believing that was her "sin."

But she had heard about this Jesus, and she knew she must see him. So, taking with her a jar of ointment to anoint Jesus, she boldly, audaciously enters a Pharisee's house. She enters the house of someone who quickly condemns her in his own mind and heart. She probably senses his condemnation as clearly as Jesus did, but she lets nothing

stop her. She stands behind Jesus, and she finally knows, she finally experiences the fullness of God's loving presence. Encountering that love, feeling it flow into her wounded soul, she begins to weep and offers both the ointment and her tears to Jesus.

This is where healing happens; this is where gratitude flows out from our hearts into the world. We experience our own need; we experience our own failure to be the people we believe God calls us to be; we experience our sin. We know we've missed the mark; we know we'll miss it again. And ... and we experience the healing power of forgiveness and love. We see ourselves a little more honestly, and, like the woman in this morning's reading, we see the depth of our need for God's love and grace. Then, in some unexpected encounter with the living Christ in another person, in our dreams, in the night sky or in the vastness of the ocean, we come to know that God's love and grace are far greater than our greatest need for help and forgiveness.

Our tears of gratitude and relief come flowing out, heedless of anyone else's condemnation or ridicule, and through those flowing tears of gratitude, God guides and blesses us anew. We find that our aim has improved and we are closer to the mark, dying to sin and living to God.

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In the weeks ahead, I will hold you close in my prayers, and my own tears of gratitude for being called here to be your minister will, I am sure, flow freely.

Grateful tears are always a gift. For that and for all the gifts of this life, thanks be to God.

Amen.

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