

"Daring to Deny Convention"

Psalm 32:1-5; Luke 7:36-50

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

November 2, 2014 – 21st Sunday after Pentecost – Rev. Ronald Botts

As Jesus made his way among the people he would often stop to teach. Almost any occasion or incident could be a reason. We tend to think of faith being taught and expressed in an intentionally gathered group, like we have here today; but Jesus used every street corner as a church, every shoreline as a synagogue. Sometimes he talked as he went, sometimes he sat. More often than not he went to where people were, rather than waiting for them to come to him. His was a mission, not a speaking tour.

So it was in this unnamed city, where our scripture takes place today—unnamed, but probably Capernaum. As is typical Jesus had been teaching in the market and other public places. People had been going on about their lives in daily fashion, doing the things they always did, thinking of this as no different than any other day. Suddenly someone steps into the scene who makes an impact like no other—at least for many. This life-changing encounter was perhaps the last thing expected on that day.

A woman stops to buy fruit from a street-side vendor. She hears a commotion a little further along her path and tries to decide whether she will proceed in the way she has intended or whether she'll go by another street. The commotion could be a flock of animals being driven through the streets or soldiers on maneuvers. Who could tell?

As she gets closer she sees that someone is talking. At first she gets only a glimpse of him, enough to show her that this is not some figure of royalty in a fine robe or one of the esteemed rabbis of the city. She doesn't recognize the man and she can hear only bits and pieces of what he says because of the noise in the street; yet, she presses on. She must pass this jam of people if she is to get to where she intends.

As she comes closer the words of this man become clearer. She stops momentarily at the edge of this gathering but, strangely, she feels compelled to stay. She can see the man now before her. He is like a magnet that locks her into that place, as indeed he seems to hold all the people who stop long enough to hear. And his eyes—what penetrating eyes! She even feels those eyes looking deeply into her own, so much so that she looks downward from embarrassment.

This man is telling of God's love, But, how can God love her? She can't love herself or even stand the reflection she sees in the water. She hates herself and what she has become. She loathes the men she gives pleasure to and is jealous of the other women who seem so happy as they go about their shopping.

This man, who others in the crowd appear to recognize, seems now to be speaking directly to her. He describes her unhappiness and her sense of being lost. It's as if he knows her pain and enters into it himself to show her the way out. Could it be that life can begin again as he says? Is it possible that God's love is great enough that it can extend even to her? She

begins to cry, but not out of sadness as she does regularly. She cries because there is a joy filling her now and it makes her feel that she has value once again.

As this teacher ends his impromptu session someone invites him home to eat. Yes, she recognizes this man. It is Simon, one of the Pharisees. She knows his grand house. Suddenly she decides what she will do and hurries home to get a jar of treasured oil she has hidden away, kept for a special time. She knows this is that occasion and, therefore, is not hesitant.

The woman soon returns and sets about to enter this gathering where she has not been invited. She isn't challenged upon arriving, perhaps because she is presumed to be a serving girl because of the flask she carries. Such women would be all but invisible in those days and not worth a second glance.

All those reclining there are men, as would be the custom. Almost unnoticed she quickly approaches Jesus and boldly sets about to wash his feet, an impertinent act that totally defies convention in the ancient world. The guests are truly aghast, but none more so than the host. Why wasn't she stopped by his household staff?

It shocks all the invitees that Jesus allows the woman to touch him and doesn't pull away. The Pharisees especially keep themselves far removed from the unworthy that they might not be tainted through contact with such blatant sinners. What kind of a holy man can this teacher be?

Simon knew exactly what kind of woman this was, and to think she is here within his own courtyard. He didn't need to know her personally, because he understood her low place within society. Jesus, on the other hand, didn't relate to people as categories but as individuals. And what our Master saw was that she was repentant and longed for the redemption of her soul. She looked up at him while drying his feet with her hair. He said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." From that moment her life changed profoundly and she was filled with an inner joy....

The story of the woman of the streets and Simon the Pharisee is not that of sinner and saint, but it is about one person who realized unrepented sin and one who didn't. It is this deeper understanding of her estrangement from God and herself that led her to discover the answer in Jesus.

In a similar way it reminds us of the prodigal son. The younger man has much to be sorry for, but he realizes the mess he has made of his life and admits both to his errors and the need for forgiveness. His older brother, like the Pharisee, does not understand his situation; and so, he is not in touch with the changes he needs to make.

Often it is harder for "respectable" people to see the gap created between themselves and God | than it is for the more obvious sinner. Pride often stands in the way of realization, confession, and change. The unknowing think, "If life isn't right it's not my fault. I'm the victim, not part of the cause."

Our Gospel text for today stands as a reminder for those of us within the church that we are not the elite, not the perfect, not the self-sufficient people we are tempted to think of

ourselves. Instead, we need to be aware of our daily sins which have the effect of alienating us from God and from each other. We have to understand how much choice we exercise over our everyday lives. Some of our actions are poorly thought out, often selfish, and result in others' suffering.

Only when we realize how we fail daily can we take the first step of change. That is entirely within our own power. Being lifted up through grace to begin again, now that is outside our capabilities. Jesus assured the repentant woman, "Your sins are forgiven." And if our heart is right, he will say that to us as well.

We can be freed from where we've been and the door will be opened to where we need to go. Of this, I am sure.