

One Part Law and Two Parts Grace: a recipe for Love and  
Forgiveness  
Proper 6 C

*Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. - Luke 7: 47*

How does one show great love? The principal characters in today's gospel, apart from Jesus himself, are Simon and the woman. These two offer a study in contrasts. It is easy to portray Simon unfavorably, yet his reaction to this woman and her actions is both reasonable and appropriate religiously and culturally.

Simon is everything we might expect that God wants us to be: hospitable, a student of God's word and scrupulous about issues of morality. Jesus suggests that there was little in this man's life which needed divine forgiveness. He seemed perfect.

Oddly, Simon lacks the very virtues he fails to give the woman: forgiveness and love (cf. 7:47).

The woman, on the other hand, who is cast in a favorable light in this account, is clearly not viewed in such a light by her peers. She is a woman, a fact which in that culture limits appropriate behavior, a limitation she does not observe. She is a "sinner," a veiled reference to sexual immorality. She is a disruptive, uninvited party-crasher who makes a spectacle. Her brazen and emotional behavior is disturbing to those who had gathered for dinner. What's the difference, then, between Simon and the woman?

The woman has what Simon lacks: forgiveness and love.

Here is the contrast we are given: someone righteous, Unforgiven and loveless and a sinner, forgiven and full of much love?

Many of us can identify with the woman who anointed Jesus' feet, but a less appealing prospect is to identify with Simon the Pharisee: Simon the judgmental, Simon the scornful, Simon who couldn't even show the common courtesy of a welcoming kiss, but who still believed himself several cuts above the repentant woman.

The problem is, if we are like Simon, we are not apt to know it, for Simon was blind to his need for forgiveness. Jesus did not tell the parable of the two debtors for the woman's benefit, but for Simon's.

When a person suffers from sin blindness, it often takes direct confrontation or a particularly apropos example to force insight. Jesus the Great Physician set about to do radical surgery.

If we don't see any of Simon in our own character, it may be because he doesn't lurk there...but it could be because Simons\_ always have trouble seeing themselves as they are. Jesus confronted Simon with the parable to make him see. We can use the parable in the same way to confront ourselves.

When we do, we are likely to discover we possess elements of both the woman and Simon, and both need much forgiveness.

Every one of our readings today deals with leaders that were confronted by their blindness and unwillingness to see how God in his mercy overlooks the law in favor of grace. His mercy and compassion does not do away with the effects of sin but frees us to choose to live in grace.

Last week I was asked by a priest of the church from Illinois, to do him the favor of officiating at an internment for a parishioner. At the family gravesite at Maple Hill Cemetery I noticed a grave marker of a family member – the son of the deceased whose name was James. He was born in 1957 and died in 2005 at age 48. I inquired of his sister what led to James early death. She said, “Let’s just say, he lived a really hard life.” There was pain in her voice. After the service she lingered at his grave. I thought of James when I reflected on the law of sin and how its effects on all our lives. Despite love and forgiveness sin makes our lives hard and it can kill us.

Sin killed Uriah because of David’s greed and lust. The law of sin led Peter also called Cephas, to take sides in the church he was leading and show favoritism to those who kept the traditional practices of his forefathers. This led tp division in the church and Peter had to be confronted by Paul. Simon had trouble letting go of his judgment toward a woman whose life had been hard. Jesus applied that same judgment toward him in his lack of love for both Jesus and the woman.

Law and Grace – like some television sitcom or series about policemen shows it is to know which of these will prevail. The scriptures teach us today that kings and kingdoms are not immune to applying one without the other. They also teach in the case of Peter and Simon the Pharisee that religion is also not immune to tipping the scales of justice causing an imbalance.

Some in their enthusiasm for law and tradition want to protect the Church in the name of doing what is right and create rigid standards that do not allow for human frailty. Others in trying to correct that rigidity apply heavy doses of grace but go too far and throw out the God given standards that give us boundaries and knowledge of what is right and wrong. The fulcrum that balances law and grace rises to the top like whipped cream on top of a mug of coffee: great love can overcome great sin. Those forgiven little love little. Those forgiven much, love much. Love adds the weight to balance the scales.

The greater the debt we owe the greater forgiveness of that debt. And the greater will be the love from the one who forgives us. Jesus love for each of us despite our sinfulness, is greater than our sin. Love covers a multitude of sin. Yet we are told to go and sin no more. So the Lord turned to the woman who loved much and forgave all her sins. Having forgiven her, he said, "Your faith has saved you, go in peace."

You and I have a choice once we are forgiven: live by the law or live by the grace of God that removed our debt. For the woman forgiven the choice was easy. May our choice to live by such grace be as easy as hers. Let great love prevail. Amen.