

The Forgiven Woman and the Pharisee

Homily at St. John of God Church, San Francisco

JUNE 6, 2010

by

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During my Cursillo, one of the speakers mentioned the old Palmolive green liquid dishwashing detergent TV commercials featuring Madge, the wisecracking manicurist, popular in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s. I watched a few of them on YouTube. Women would come into Madge's beauty parlor with **awful** looking hands due to the same dire culprit: dishwashing. Madge would comment, rather saucily, on the condition of her client's hands as she placed them in a bowl to soak, with lines like, "When I see your hands, I wish I were a nurse," or upon hearing one woman's husband was coming to pick her up, Madge quipped, "Well don't let him see your hands or he may drop you!" Madge would then sing the praises of Palmolive with the tag line, "it softens hands while you do dishes." Finally she would announce to the shock of her clients, "You're soaking in it." The woman would start pulling her hands out of the bowl saying, "Oh Madge, dishwashing liquid?" only to be reassured by Madge, "Relax, it's Palmolive!" They had been soaking in this healing elixir the whole time and never knew it, till Madge revealed the surprising good news.

Our Gospel passage reminds us, similar to Madge's customers, that we have been soaking in God's grace all along, a grace that has nothing to do with being holy or spiritual or a good enough person, but based solely on God's irrevocable decision to love us unconditionally as we are. Once again, it's guess who's coming to dinner as Jesus makes a special guest appearance and the meal becomes a time for divine revelation. The Gospel poses the question, are we willing to be healed and transformed into the people we dream of becoming? Certainly the unnamed woman who lavishes so much attention on Jesus, has answered **yes** to this question. We don't know much about this woman, except she is a public sinner. Though she utters no words, she speaks through her weeping, kissing, and anointing, so her voice is not lost. Although the way she approaches Jesus in an almost erotic intimate manner, has suggested to previous readers that she might have been a prostitute or even the woman caught in adultery and rescued

from stoning by Jesus, the text does not allude to the nature of her sin, because ultimately it is irrelevant. She comes to thank Jesus because he has wiped her sins away, just as she **now** wipes his feet with her tears of joy. She realized God was more interested in her **future** than in her past. Jesus saw her as she **could** be. A couple in Connecticut a few years ago had a garage sale and they decided to put out a mirror they had received as a wedding gift. The reason they were selling it was that it had a gaudy aqua-colored metal frame and they couldn't find a room where it looked good. A man, looking to decorate his apartment, bought the mirror for five dollars. He was all excited, saying, "What a great deal. This mirror's like new. It still has the plastic on it." With that, he peeled off the aqua-colored protective covering, to unveil a beautiful gold-finished frame underneath. For Jesus, sin is the ugly aqua-colored film that needs to be stripped away to reveal the true beauty underneath, the brilliant image God has put there and by removing that cloudy film of sin, we might now become the way God always intended us to be.

I admire this woman's audacity or as our Jewish friends would say, yudsper. Some commentators have likened her scandalous behavior to a woman today showing up topless at a formal wedding. She barges in uninvited, cutting through a barrier of hostility, demanding **her** place at the table, breaking all protocol rules about how men and women interacted with each other at that time, willing to risk ridicule and social disgrace, so as to provide Jesus with the hospitality Simon the Pharisee had **not** given him. She pours out expensive ointment not only because she is grateful for having been forgiven so **much**, but it also reveals how **much** Jesus is worth to her. It is God's presence spilling out of her in thanksgiving. She personifies what Mother Teresa of Calcutta later said, "we can do no **great** things, only small things with **great** love." Loved people love other people! She didn't care what anyone labeled her. The guests had written her off as a failure, a reject, washed up, had made too many mistakes, and would never accomplish any of **her** dreams. But she knew **God** had not given up on her and we **are** what **God** in inconceivable goodness labels us: We're redeemed, We've had setbacks but we have an **amazing** future, We're empowered! She was celebrating the **new** things God was doing in her

life. We are defined **not** by what people say we are, but by what **God** says we are, with God always having the **final** say.

And then there's **Simon**. Our Gospel story is about **two** sinners, with Simon being the second one. Simon is interested in Jesus, probably having heard much about his preaching and miracles, wondering what this prophet might have to offer as theological dinner talk or even entertainment, but not **really** interested in being converted by him. Thus his is a self-serving hospitality, which fails to provide the basic social amenities that would shock Martha Stewart today. But notice Jesus's hospitality is the **embodiment** of welcome. He accepts Simon's invitation, despite the hostility the Pharisees have shown him previously. He affirms Simon by respecting his intellect, even though Simon reflects more accurately the observation of the 18th century English satirist, Jonathan Swift, who **said** we have just **enough** religion to hate, but not enough to make us love one another. Simon seems to have wanted enough forgiveness so as not to feel badly, but not enough to make him change his life. Simon doesn't think he has done anything wrong and so doesn't seek forgiveness nor is he aware of how **much** he has already been forgiven. He is not willing to open himself to the judgment and mercy of God. Simon sees the whole incident as abstract, not relating to a real woman in crisis, but as a member of a class, a category, an unclean sinner. Even though Simon claims Jesus could **not** be a prophet, ironically Jesus is **enough** of a prophet to know what the silent Simon is saying to himself. Jesus tells him a parable in which two kinds of debt are forgiven. When an average debt is cancelled, we are relieved, but when a huge unpayable debt is cancelled, we feel as though we have risen from the dead, a gratitude that overflows into love, a love that is as extravagant as the debt that was forgiven. Because of his prejudices, Simon cannot encounter the woman anew and is unable to see the woman as **Jesus** sees her, a situation similar to a man who arrived at Heaven and was shown into God's office for judgment. One office wall was a huge window looking down on earth. The earth was beautiful with its blue waters, green forests, and white clouds. On the table in front of the window, there was a pair of glasses. He thought they must be God's glasses. No one was around, so the man tried them on and looked at the earth again. This time he saw war, hunger, poverty, sickness, and so **much** inhumanity that he could not

bear it. He heard a voice behind him, "Please, take off my glasses." The man did so, immediately. He stood there trembling, waiting for his punishment because he had messed with God's stuff. After a long pause, the voice gently asked, "What did you see?" "I saw hate, corruption, and evil!" the man answered. "Did you feel any love or compassion?" the voice asked. "No!!!" the man said. "After what I saw, I would destroy the **whole** planet without any hesitation or regret!" Then God said, "That's why **YOU** can't use my glasses. You may not **see** what I see, unless you can **feel** what I feel." When Simon answers correctly about who has been forgiven more, he makes a judgment on **himself**. Simon has never known God's forgiveness so **deep** it can release such lavish gestures of love and naked emotional vulnerability, as the woman displayed. The 14 inches between our head and heart can often be the longest journey of our lives. Can Simon see the woman **not** as a moral and religious outcast, but as one whom God loves and has forgiven? He's worried so much about the woman's debts that he is blind to how **large** his **own** debt is. Jesus, always on the side of the sinner against the so-called upright, challenges Simon, Do you really **see** this woman and her overflowing love? Can he turn off that harsh judgmental voice in his head and open up his heart to the tenderness of the moment? Can he let **grace** change his life? We are forgiven because we are loved and while repentance may precede forgiveness, even repentance is a grace offered by God. Once again, we are continually soaking in God's grace. Our Gospel implies that divine forgiveness is much more abundant than our human condemning self-righteous attitudes will allow.

So we **are** loved forgiven sinners. Forgiveness is unconditional or it is not forgiveness at all. It's not about the slate being wiped clean, but about having a **transformed** relationship with God, who through Jesus, has reached out and embraced us. So **we** are now empowered to live a **new** life filled with extravagant gratitude, which in turn liberates us so we can show others the compassion that has been shown to us. Do we know in our hearts the great love to which we are invited? Maybe God's grace is always offensive unless **we** are the ones receiving it, in which case are **we** publicly willing to take down our hair, weep, and kiss someone's feet? How do **we** welcome Jesus into our lives? Can **we** let grace change our lives too? Sadly Simon's story is sometimes

the church's story, not offering the hospitality Jesus offered. Writer Phillip Yancy tells the story of a friend in Chicago who worked with marginalized people. He was visited once by a prostitute who was in dire straits. She hired herself out to support her drug habit; and she was homeless, sick, and unable to buy food for herself or her 3 year old daughter. Yancy's friend asked if she had thought about going to a church for help, and the woman seemed horrified. "Church?! Why would I ever go there? I was already feeling **terrible** about myself. They'd just make me feel worse." Can the Church suspend her judgment about people, accept them as they are and where they are and love them as Jesus would love them?

In Luke, Jesus is God's hospitality to us, the uninvited sinful guest. Those who are outsiders, poor, sick, disillusioned, or stuck in sin ... **all** are welcome at the table by Jesus, God's host at our Eucharistic banquet. Again, it is **all** grace, which is available to us right now and will **always** be accessible to us, a grace given out of pure generosity and everlasting mercy. As theologian Paul Tillich writes so poignantly: "Grace strikes us when we are in great pain and restlessness ... It strikes us when our disgust for our own being, our weakness, our hostility, and our lack of direction and composure have become intolerable to us. It strikes us when, year after year, the longed-for perfection of life does not appear, when the old compulsions reign with us as they have for decades. Some times at that moment a wave of light breaks into our darkness, and it is as though a voice were saying: "You are accepted." There is nothing we can do to make God stop loving us. Grace is experiencing God's favor when we know we don't deserve it. Grace is God loving us when we are unlovable. Grace is God forgiving what is unforgivable. Grace is the core of who we are, our fundamental identity, such that our lives when openhearted can become a series of more and more **yeses** to God. Ultimately, our only response is to say thank you through our service to others, but **relax**, it's still the **same** grace we've been **soaking** in all along. And to paraphrase a greeting from one of the team members at Cursillo, God loves you just the way you are and there's not a **damn** thing you can do about it!"