

Crying for Acceptance

by The Rev. Heather Tunney, Associate Pastor of East Liberty Presbyterian Church

Luke 7:36-50

*Presented at East Liberty Presbyterian Church, Pittsburgh, PA
March 2, 2008*

Mother Teresa writes a story of a brief, chance encounter with a man on a London street. Although short, this interaction lingered with her because of the connection she was able to make with a stranger in need of attention and affection. She writes:

One day I was walking down the street in London, and I saw a tall, thin man sitting on the corner, all huddled up looking most miserable.

I went up to him, shook his hand, and asked him how he was. He looked up at me and said, "Oh! After such a long, long time I feel the warmth of a human hand!" And he sat up.

There was such a beautiful smile on his face because somebody was kind to him. Just shaking his hand made him feel like somebody.

For me, he was Jesus in distressing disguise. I gave him the feeling of being loved by somebody, the joy of being loved.¹

In today's Gospel passage, Jesus himself gives a similar gift to the unnamed woman in the story. Jesus gives her the feeling of being *loved* by somebody, as Mother Teresa says, "the joy of being loved". In our story for today a woman only identified by her sinfulness and her unsavory profession crashes a dinner party at the home of Simon, a Pharisee, a leader of the Jewish people. We know very little about this

woman. Luke doesn't even include her name. All we are told is that she is sinful, a "woman of the street." Her baggage names her; her past identifies her. From Simon's reaction, we see that this unnamed woman is someone from whom synagogue leaders should keep their distance. The reality is, however, that this woman's brokenness is probably just as *inherited* as it is of her own making. In the culture of her day, after all, women could not own property and could not make a decent living on their own. It is likely that the systems of the day set her up for failure. Her need to survive and the sexism of the day may have landed her stuck in misery, sin, and brokenness. In Gospel times, it would have taken very little for a woman to end up in this predicament – the loss of a husband or father with no man to care for her – could have easily landed any woman "on the street" – homeless and penniless.

This broken, sinful woman breaks into the story, showering Jesus' feet with her tears, and wiping them clean with her hair. This unnamed woman of this story comes to the dinner table with hunger of her own. She wants what we all want and need: someone to love her, someone to accept her; someone to recognize her worth; someone to show her kindness. Her tears tell her story: they speak of grief and shame, they tell of her pain and loss. And her tears may reflect gratitude at Jesus' loving kindness. But through her tears come a cry for this acceptance that is so raw, so true that they reach straight into Jesus' heart and they make others uncomfortable.

The most uncomfortable one around the table is the host of the dinner party, a Pharisee named Simon. He has a pretty clear picture in his mind about who belongs at the table and who does *not*. While his hospitality has extended far enough to include Jesus and his rag-tag group of disciples, this woman clearly does not belong. Likely he is concerned about adhering to rules – this woman's presence in his home is a *defiling* presence. He knows, just like everyone does, where she has been and what she is about. Simon is in many respects a caring host. He wants to protect Jesus from this woman. He wishes to simply follows the rules of the day to keep her in her

¹ 'The Warmth of a Hand' *In the Heart of the World*. (MJF Books: New York, 1997) p 67-68.

place and protect Jesus' place of honor. His lines may be drawn out of a simple fear, but he draws a line – a clear one, about who is in and who is out; who belongs and who doesn't belong. His lines are lines to protect – himself, his guests, even Jesus. But these protective lines are dividing lines.

Simon's actions are not unfamiliar actions. We see it all the time. Dividing lines are drawn all around us, separating liberal from conservative, gay from straight, black from white, man from woman, rich from poor. People are handed out labels all around us. They tell us in which neighborhoods we are to live, which schools we are to attend, in which church we should worship. We see Simon's fear in denominational battles around sexuality and ordination standards. We see Simon's fear in legislative efforts to fight terrorism by ethnic profiling and more stringent immigration laws. We see Simon's fear in school district funding imbalances and in zoning battles for urban redevelopment. We see it all the time.

And like Simon, we ourselves may even draw some lines – lines to keep ourselves and our family safe; lines to secure our place in the world; lines to keep out those who are different from us. In fact, like Simon, we may even try to take our line-drawing a step further. We may try to *protect* Jesus by telling him who he should spend time with, to whom he should listen, who he should love.

But you see, Jesus doesn't need our help. *We need his*. No, Jesus doesn't need us to tell him what to do or who and how to love. We need to turn to Jesus to find out what *we* need to do. As we see in this text, when faced with the outrageous actions of this sinful woman, Jesus doesn't question what to do. Jesus doesn't cave into societal pressures to label and divide. Jesus knows what to do. He *loves* this woman. He welcomes this woman. He lets this woman – a woman who probably can't remember what it feels like to be touched in a loving way – touch him, to anoint him. See, Jesus knows what to do when faced with this woman and her cries for acceptance. He loves her. He accepts her. He forgives her so that she may be free from the sin that entraps her. He affirms her gifts for service.

He values her as a child of God, as a human being of worth. Jesus loves.

Friends, our brothers and sisters are crying for acceptance all around us. Men and women, boys and girls are crying to be heard, to be valued, to be cared for, to be welcomed, to be loved. People with baggage, people with sin, people with fears – they are all crying out for acceptance. We need to hear Jesus' message just as we need to hear the cries around us. And when we hear the cries for acceptance – whether they are coming from those around us or whether we recognize those cries as our own – we must ask the catchy question of our day: What would Jesus do? The answer is so simple – so amazingly simple: Jesus would LOVE. When in doubt, my friends, *love*. Love radically, love thoroughly. Love with forgiveness. Love with risk. Love well.

Mother Teresa again writes:

“Let us be very sincere in our dealings with each other and have the courage to accept each other as we are. Do not be surprised at or become preoccupied with each others' failure; rather see and find the good in each other, for each one of us is created in the image of God.”²

And in the moments when the cries you are hearing are your own, when you find yourself on the outside looking in – hear Jesus' welcome. Hear Jesus' invitation to come to the table – come and be fed, come and know that you, too, are loved.

Copyright 2008 – The Rev. Heather Tunney

² Ibid. p 14.