**June 16, 2013 – 4 Pentecost (Proper 6)**

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When I was four years old, my brother told me that it was the law that I had to know how to read before I went to kindergarten. He was always telling me things like that – and I always believed him. And to his credit, once he told me it was the law, he undertook to teach me to read himself. He was six. I still remember the book he used. It was about telling time, and had a clock on it with moveable hands, so I guess I probably also learned how to tell time at the same time, even though that wasn't part of the Law according to David.

This was during the summer, so by the time I got to kindergarten in the fall I was a pretty good reader. Unfortunately, in those days, they didn't actually teach kids to read until first grade, and kindergarten was for learning the basics like the alphabet and telling time. Needless to say, I was more than a little bored. Also in those days, we didn't have two years of preschool to teach us how to behave in school. We were just dumped in to sink or swim.

So I didn't know it was wrong to chatter when the teacher wasn't saying anything particularly interesting to me. At least I didn't know at first. After several sessions in the corner, having been singled out and shamed, I soon learned, though.

Awhile back I ran across a report card from first grade, the next year. It was pretty average, but I remember seeing one note that made me kind of sad. It said, "Jean reads very well, but she speaks too softly for anyone to hear." Gone was the happy little chatterbox from kindergarten. The shame had taken root and it had silenced me. With the exception of music, that shameful silence would follow me all the way through high school, and even beyond.

These days we seem to spend a lot of time shaming people, either to put them in what we consider to be their place or to make ourselves feel better. But as we see from today's Gospel, this pastime is nothing new.

We find Jesus visiting a Pharisee named Simon (not to be confused with Simon Peter). Some version of this story exists in all four Gospels, but in Matthew and Mark, Simon was a leper living in Bethany. In John, who often has a different take, there was no Simon at all and the person pouring the ointment was Mary of Bethany, Lazarus and Martha's sister.

But here in Luke, Simon is a Pharisee, not a leper, and the woman is unnamed, but is described as a "woman of the city" and a "sinner" who has found out where Jesus was having dinner and followed him there. She enters a room where she is almost certainly not welcome, being both a woman and a known and maybe even notorious sinner, and she demonstrates her love for Jesus in the most extravagant way, by washing his feet with her tears and drying them with her hair, and pouring costly perfumed oil over them. In the middle east in the first century, oil was often poured over people's heads as a gesture of honor, but never over their feet. This would have been considered really, really wasteful.

Whenever I encounter these little domestic scenes in the Gospels, I often find myself observing the social interactions like a fly on the wall. Who was this woman? How did she get in? Did she just barge past the servants pretending to be on important business for their boss? Did she say she was a friend of Jesus and was expected? We never know because she never says a word. Maybe she, too, was shamed into being silent.

But shamed or no, she puts herself into what could be a bad situation in order to be near Jesus and to minister to him. Not to talk to him or get anything from him, but merely to serve him. She's certainly dismissed by Simon as being of no account, to the point of his thinking that Jesus must be a false prophet because he can't see what kind of woman is defiling him by her very presence, much less treating him with such intimacy.

But Simon's dismissiveness doesn't go unchallenged by Jesus. Once again, my imagination takes hold, and I can just hear Simon muttering under his breath and Jesus not quite saying, "I'm right HERE. I can HEAR you!"

However, Jesus doesn't challenge what Simon says directly. Instead he tells a little parable about two debtors whose debts were forgiven and the relative amount of love they have for the person who forgave them. Jesus quickly turns the parable back on Simon and shows him how this sinful woman has shown him more hospitality than Simon, his actual host, has.

If Simon were a good Jew, and we have no reason to suppose he isn't, he should have been mortified by his poor show of hospitality to someone he had invited into his home. He certainly doesn't say anything more about the woman ministering to Jesus. And, because of HER actions, this woman knew herself to be forgiven and was able to leave in peace. Her shame was nullified by Jesus' acceptance of her and by his forgiveness.

This could be just another story of a Pharisee getting his comeuppance, and a poor put-upon person being blessed by Jesus, but I think it would be a mistake to think it's that simple. There are some big themes in this story – sin and shame, forgiveness, hospitality, and love, but today I want to focus on sin and shame.

To Jesus, they aren't the same thing. Sin is something we all do, in big and small ways. I can't say if we're all born sinners, like St. Augustine does, or if we are just really good at picking it up, but we all sin and we all owe a debt that we can't repay – a debt that was forgiven by God through Christ.

But shame is different. There are two kinds of shame, as we see in our Gospel today. The first kind of shame is a personal feeling that comes from knowing that we haven't acted in a way that is congruent with God either through our actions or our inactions – or as our General Confession says, "for what we have done, and for what we have left undone."

This kind of shame might be more accurately called remorse. It's the uncomfortable feeling we get when we fall short of Jesus' example. The remedy for this kind of remorse is repentance and accepting God's forgiveness, and striving always to do better.

The second kind of shame is something that we do to someone else, as Simon did to the unnamed woman. It's a mean kind of shame that marginalizes people and keeps them down, sometimes to the point where they start to believe it themselves. This kind of shame might be more accurately called humiliation. Imposing this kind of shame on other people is, I believe, a terrible sin.

I read a very disturbing article the other day about the psychological warfare that this country is waging on the poor. Between the government's attitudes and selective news editing, the poor are constantly described as lazy unmotivated dropout mooching losers, who can't earn their keep, who are unwilling to work like the rest of us, and who just want a handout.

Well, we've been poor, and we've known a lot of poor people, and this characterization couldn't be further from the truth. Michael and I used to work at a homeless shelter that housed seven women. Every single one of them worked full time, and a couple had more than one job. They were so thankful to have a place to stay because otherwise it would be the street or sitting up all night in one of the homeless drop-in centers, guarding their few belongings. They worked harder than anyone I know.

Yet, the poor are stigmatized as lazy and unmotivated, to the point that they are actually starting to believe it themselves. They have been convinced to perpetuate their own shame, which conveniently makes them a whole lot easier to keep down. But neither the shame nor the sin here is that people are poor. The sin here, and OUR shame, is that we as a country, and we as the Body of Christ, are not doing everything in our power to bring them up out of their poverty.

Every time we hear someone say, "Why should I give my hard-earned money to some loser?" or "They're not trying hard enough - they should just pull themselves up by their own bootstraps!" and we don't challenge it (or heaven forbid we say those things ourselves) we commit a sin. Every time we dismiss an entire group of people because they are poor (or people of color, or immigrants, or mentally ill) we commit a sin.

For that matter, every time we participate in an "ism" – racism, classism, sexism, ageism, homophobia – by what we do or leave undone, we commit a sin.

And every time we shame a child to silence, we commit a sin.

We are responsible for a lot! And we have many, many opportunities to mess up. Fortunately, we have Jesus in our corner, and the good news is that our sins are forgiven. As it says in 1st John and in our very own Book of Common Prayer, "If anyone sin, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus. Christ the righteous."

But, we have to do our part, and our part is to repent and to change our lives. As the lovely Rite I Absolution goes:

The Almighty and merciful Lord grant you absolution and remission of all your sins, true repentance, amendment of life, and the grace and consolation of his Holy Spirit. Amen.

The unnamed woman in today's Gospel story knew her sins were forgiven, and she no longer felt any shame. She knew this because Jesus told her they were and she couldn't help but respond. She didn't show her great love for Jesus IN ORDER to have her sins forgiven. She acted out of gratitude AFTER they were forgiven.

As should we. Because our sins are forgiven, we should live every day in love and gratitude for the great gift we have been freely given. We should wash the feet of the poor with our tears and dry them with our hair, or in other words, love and serve our neighbors wherever we find them. We should spread our perfumed oil over the heads of our enemies, or in other words, spread God's message of peace and reconciliation wherever we go.

And we should do this not because we are made to, or because we are shamed into it. We should do this because it's right. We should do it because God loves us and forgives us, and he expects no less of us.