

First Presbyterian Church

Cheyenne, Wyoming

June 13, 2010

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Psalm 5, Luke 7:36-50, Galatians 2:15-21

Worship Theme: Disturbing Grace

One of the most beautiful expressions of the Christian faith is from Ephesians 2:8. "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—." Ah, yes, how much we Christians count on this amazing grace of God to not only save, but guide and sustain us. This same grace is in the passages read today. But, the expression of this grace in the context of these scriptures is much more disturbing than it is amazing. May we be disturbed by it today.

This grace of God in Jesus Christ invites us to come to God, who accepts us, unconditionally, which makes it an amazing grace. At the same time, this grace is very disturbing to a world that loves to set conditions on acceptance and would rather exclude than include. This grace of God in Jesus Christ breaks down these barriers. Those of us who have had our lives and values disturbed by this grace of God, **rejoice**, for we realize this grace has saved us from a world based on false and destructive standards; and has delivered us to the Kingdom of God, where we are loved and accepted unconditionally; and can love and accept others in the same manner.

As wonderful and profound as this disturbing grace is, it is not easy to live it out in this world. Sometimes, as members of God's Kingdom or the church, we develop an identity crisis and forget all the wonderful gifts of love, grace and fellowship God has given us. For example, we heard in the background Paul's deep thoughts written to the Galatians, how the apostles, who sat at the feet of Jesus blew it when it came time to move forward in their witness of God's grace to the world. They tried to set a barrier between Christian Jews and Christian Gentiles. They had forgotten that both Jews and Gentiles were made right with God by what Jesus did for them and us on the cross. Their judgmental attitude clouded the fact that all salvation comes through the faith and grace of Jesus Christ, not the law. So, Paul had to chew them out for their legalistic views, divisive rulings, and disturb them again with the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

It is tragic how even the best of human beings can be prejudice and misuse the law of God to distort the meaning of what Jesus has done for us. They— or— we might even be trying to protect God's grace, so that it is not wasted on those we deem not worthy. But, in our enthusiasm to guard God's grace, we try to place human conditions on this unconditional divine gift. If we could actually do this, then Jesus would have died for nothing. Then God's grace, which leads to forgiveness, salvation and new character would be empty, and we would be lost forever. Where ever the modern church does this, it needs to be disturbed by God's unconditional grace, again and again.

The passage from Luke is a good place for God's unconditional grace to begin to disturb those of us who need it. At first, let's pretend we are simply observers of this story of disturbing grace.

The first scene we observe is Jesus having supper in the home of a Pharisee named, Simon. Suddenly, an uninvited guest enters the dining room. It is a woman considered a “Sinner” to the religious community. Let your own imagination run wild on what sins she may have committed, and you may be right on all of them. Whatever the sins, just being labeled a “Sinner” meant that a person is to be excluded from decent society, and of course, the grace or Kingdom of God. Or so, the “righteous” people say.

Simon, on the other hand is wealthy, and well educated, especially in the scriptural law, and highly respected in the community. The meal at Simon’s house is a formal dinner that may involve several courses. The persons consuming the food lounge on special couches around the table as they eat. The participant’s heads are on the raised portion of the couch while their torsos and feet lay on the flat part of the couch.

The “sinner” woman has heard that Jesus is at Simon’s house, and has gathered up an alabaster jar of very expensive healing ointment. Violating all societal rules, the woman enters that house and proceeds to the dining room filled with men. She walks directly to Jesus and is weeping so hard, that she is able to bath the feet of Jesus with her tears. This weeping woman lets down her hair to dry the feet of the Messiah. Oh my, what’s more, she begins to kiss the feet of Jesus, and anoint them with this precious, expensive healing oil. Jesus calmly lets her do this for him. He understands she is there to show him gratitude and a very disturbing grace.

Righteous Simon and those of us present can hardly believe our eyes. The scene before us is embarrassing. Simon is deeply offended by the woman and Jesus. The woman has broken all the rules of righteous living. Now she obliterates even more rules in his very dining area. A woman is not permitted to serve such a special meal, let alone be at one, when men outside the family are present. **She was not invited. She should not be here.** Again, she is a sinner, and she further proves it by removing her headdress, and letting down her hair in public. “She commits the greatest disgrace for a woman (Jeremias).” All this weeping, kissing and anointing of a man’s feet in a public place by a sinner woman is a travesty of proper etiquette and Godly social rules. It has illicit sexual overtones. Simon is thinking to himself, “If this man-Jesus-were a prophet, he would know who and what kind of woman this is— that she is a ‘Sinner!’”

On one hand, I am overwhelmed with admiration for Jesus because he is able to see what this woman was about, and he is able to be God’s grace in the chaos of the disturbing moment. On the other hand, I can understand Simon’s indignant embarrassment about this scene. You see, pastors sometimes have unexpected incidents like this happen to them.

It was the Christmas Eve service of 1975. I was 28, and had announced the Sunday before to the congregation that I was serving at the time. The church was packed. People were all chattering away as I walked from the front of the church to the back to prepare to process with the choir to the front again. I happened to be at the pew where my wife and two young children sat, when this beautiful young woman, of questionable character, ran toward me down the main aisle. She shouted my name and in plain sight of everyone there, threw her arms around me. She planted a big kiss on my unsuspecting mouth, and exclaimed loudly, “Bob, I will miss you!” Of course,

everyone became stone quiet. They saw it all and heard every word. It is beyond my ability to express the depth of my surprise and embarrassment. I wanted to die. I wanted God to take me immediately. Now, God, Now! As this happened, my eyes met my wife's eyes. My eyes showed shock. Holly's now darkened eyes said, "Yes, you are a dead man." The young woman was a member of the church. I knew that she was somewhat shunned in the community, and I had spoken to her only a few times when she was in church. I had tried to show her some acceptance by the church, and had attempted in what I thought was a safe manner, to let her know that there was a God who loved her. "I think" that she was trying to thank me in her own way. "I think" what she shared was a disturbing grace. She did leave an impression. Fortunately for me, my wife let me live. Unfortunately, for the young woman, hugging and kissing me that one time did not have the same redeeming effect as kissing and washing the feet of Jesus for the woman known as "a Sinner." As an embarrassed pastor, who understood Simon's consternation, I still deeply admired the example of grace that Jesus shared with the woman at that disturbing, yet grace-filled moment, in Simon's house. In fact, it is probably by Christ's grace that I was even able to do the service on that Christmas Eve of 1975.

Again, Jesus, able to sense the whole situation in Simon's house, speaks to Simon in a verbal parable. Watch out when Jesus speaks to us in a parable because it is like a verbal parabolic curve. It begins with Jesus and appears to be aimed at someone else out there, but as it curves around it most likely will hit us "right between the eyes."

As we enter scene two, we will see this parabolic action come to life as we listen in and visualize Jesus telling Simon the parable about a creditor and two debtors. One debtor owes the creditor ten times as much as the other. The creditor forgives both of them their debts. At this point Jesus stops and asks Simon "Which one of the debtors will love him more?" Simon, with the point of the parable figuratively sticking in his thick religious skull, reluctantly replies, "I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt." Jesus then says, "You have judged rightly."

Despite giving a "right answer," Simon still does not understand the point, and Jesus must explain it to him in a more obvious manner. Jesus asks Simon, "Do you see this woman?" Implied is, "I mean, Simon, do you see this fellow human being, whom you and others have labeled as a non-being?" "Do you see this woman, Simon?" demands Jesus. Jesus, seeing right through Simon, does not even give him a chance to answer the implied charge. "Simon," says Jesus, "I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet." In those days, it was a basic courtesy to offer water and a towel to a guest to wash the dust off their feet before eating. If the guest were special, either a servant or the host would wash the feet of the guest for them.

Then Jesus says, "This woman, this child of God, has bathed my feet with her tears, with her own precious tears, Simon! Then, throwing all legalism aside, this woman took off her headdress to dry my feet with her hair." "Simon, you did not even give me a kiss of greeting when I entered. Again, you showed me that I was not an honored guest. But in all humility and honor this woman kissed my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, as you would an honored guest, but she anointed my feet with

precious oil. Therefore I tell you, her sins, which were ten times more than yours, have been forgiven. Her great love, shown to me in this place and in these ways, proves that her sins have been forgiven, and she knows it. She has accepted the grace of God poured out to her and her actions show it. She came here, despite all the walls erected by religious and social legalism to thank God for saving and changing her life. Do you understand this disturbing grace, Simon?"

Jesus then breaks three other laws. First of all he speaks to this woman who is a stranger. That is a "No, No." Secondly, he speaks to her in public, which is forbidden. Thirdly, and worst of all he forgives her sins (which only God could do). Jesus says to her, "Your sins are forgiven. Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

Simon and the other guests who are wrapped up in the blindfolds of traditions, laws and prejudices, miss this joyous act of grace, and the divinity of the one whom gave it. All they do is grumble about Jesus. "Who does he think he is showing mercy and granting forgiveness to 'her'?" At this point, I would like to give "her" a name. Her name is "Redeemed."

The destructive stupidity of the Pharisees did not stop Jesus in his ministry of grace, forgiveness and character building. He continued to invite sinners, outcasts, men and women who accepted his grace into the kingdom of God. Jesus' ministry of the kingdom of God and disturbing grace continues today; which brings the point of the story, and the parable back to those of us observing the situation. Thanks to Jesus, we are no longer just observers. We are deeply involved.

So, "Who are we in this story?" And, "how shall we respond to this disturbing grace of God?"