

**Sermon**  
**Proper 6, Year C**  
**June 17, 2007**  
*by the Rev. Norman Bray*

In today's gospel, we heard an anointing story and a parable, before we begin to try and take any meaning from these I think that we should clear up some potential misunderstandings. As we hear the Gospels on Sunday and as we study them in our own bible studies, we encounter several stories of Jesus being anointed by a woman. In Matthew 26:6 and in Mark 14:3, Jesus is in the home of Simon the leper and has his head anointed by a woman with an alabaster jar of expensive ointment. In John 12 Jesus is at the home of Lazarus, Mary, and Martha and it is Mary who anoints his head with nard and wiped his feet with her hair. All three of these stories are very similar and they are all used in the same way, making the same statement, but the story that we heard in Luke's Gospel this morning is not related to these others. Luke's story stands on its own and is used in a very different way. Before we explore that there is one more thing that needs to be explained. When we hear the story of a woman anointing Jesus' feet and washing them with her tears and drying his feet with her hair, all of this while he is eating, for us paints a very strange picture. I will bet that almost all of you have a vision of this woman crawling around under the dinner table in a very peculiar way. That is because we cannot help but read this Gospel with our 21<sup>st</sup> century eyes and hear it with our 21<sup>st</sup> century ears. In order to get the true picture we have to put ourselves back in time, back into the 1<sup>st</sup> century in Palestine, where houses were built around courtyards and the door to the street was left open during the day. It's not unusual for people to wander in off the street, especially if it is near meal time and there is an interesting dinner

guest. There was no charge to come and listen to interesting dinner conversation, the dining area would be under a roof, but not inside the building, and there would be no table or chairs, only a long mat on the ground, perhaps on top of a carpet, surrounded by pillows. The dinner guests would lie down with their heads near the food, lying on their left side with their heads propped on their hands and their feet away from the food. If you can visualize a picnic on the ground you will be getting close to what was going on in our gospel.

Now that we have the picture straightened out, what is the message? We are not told anything that would lead us to believe that Simon is anything other than a good man. By telling us that he was a Pharisee, the writer lets us know that Simon is very respectful of the scriptures, a learned man, and a religious man. He is not trying to trap Jesus or do anything bad; this is just dinner with an interesting guest, a guest who may be a prophet. And then this woman comes in with this expensive ointment that she bought specifically for this purpose, and washes Jesus' feet and anoints them. Now the narrator of the story has told us that this woman is a sinner, we don't know any more than that, just that she is a sinner, but by touching the feet of a man in public and letting down her hair, in public, she has created a scene, a scandal, in the house of Simon the Pharisee. We get to hear Simon's thoughts and Jesus lets Simon know that he knows what he is thinking. Simon is thinking "this woman is a sinner and if Jesus was who they say he is then he would know that and act accordingly"

I want to give you 2 words right here, 2 words that I want to associate with this Gospel story and I want you to take these words out of here when you leave today. Those words are "righteousness" and "Judgment." Righteousness means living life as

God wants us to live it and being in right relation to God. Righteousness comes from God and only from God but if you listen to what Simon was thinking you will hear “self-righteousness,” and that does not come from God, that comes from us. Whenever we think to ourselves “I am glad that I am better than that person” we have just fallen into self-righteousness and created a problem for ourselves. And we all do it, I found myself doing it just last week at the gas station. I was putting gas in the car when another car pulled up beside me with a young woman and two young men. The young woman got out with a gasoline can and she was dressed in a way that our daughter was never allowed and as far as I know never wanted. I didn’t like the way that she was dressed and I did not like the way that she spoke the English language and if that was as far as I went with it then it would not have been a problem. If I had left it with not liking her dress and her language and not taken that next step, you know what I am going to say, don’t you? That next step, where I said to myself “Thank God my children aren’t like that!”

That brings me to the second word that I want you to take home today, judgment. I had taken on something that I had no right to. I had judged that young woman as somehow less than me in every way and that judgment is not given to humans, judgment is left to God alone. Simon judged the woman of the city as a sinner and I judged the woman at the gas station as less than me and Jesus pronounced no judgment at all, only forgiveness. Tell me, did that woman love Jesus so much because she knew that her sins were forgiven or were her sins forgiven because she loved Jesus so much? That is a difficult question to answer because you can see the question from two different angles. Forgiveness is definitely a natural response of the forgiven but the capacity to love is directly related to the ability to receive grace, forgiveness, and love. What would happen

if we began every day with the realization that we are forgiven? What would that do for your outlook, your attitude? Now, turn that around so that for every person that you meet, every person that you see, before you form any thought or opinion about them or what they mean to you, what if the first thing that popped into your mind is that Jesus has forgiven them their sins? If Jesus can forgive their sins and love them so much that it overwhelms us, how aggravated can you be with someone who is twenty minutes late for work, or someone who dings your car door in the parking lot? What I am trying to get across is that we need to exercise our own ability to forgive and by doing so increase our capacity to love. We know that in order to get better at something we have to practice. We practice our golf swing; we exercise to stretch and grow our muscles and avoid getting fat. In the same way we need to exercise our skills of forgiveness so that we don't become lazy and fat in our spiritual life. Try it out for a few weeks, first thing in the morning when you wake up, before coffee or brushing your teeth, say out loud "I have been forgiven and today I will practice forgiveness." If you can do that, then it will not be long before forgiveness will be a habit and it will not require conscious thought. And then you will feel what comes with that capacity to forgive, the increased capacity to love, to receive the grace that God makes available to us. The better we are at forgiveness, the more grace we will be able to acknowledge, to grasp, to take and use for our own benefit, the closer we will come to living that life that God intended for us to live, the closer we will be to that righteousness that comes from God. If we can do that, if we can all become forgiving, loving, righteous persons, then we will have no need to fear that other word, judgment, because that word will have no place in our lives. It will be back where it belongs, with God.