



Christian Education

A series of Sermons and Occasional Papers
From the clergy and members
of Holy Trinity Church
Forbes Park, Makati

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Readings for this Sunday:

Old Testament 2 Samuel 11:26-12:10,13-15
Epistle Galatians 2:11-21
Gospel Luke 7:36-50

This morning, we have read two stories: that of the prophet Nathan and that of Jesus. Both of them end with a note of forgiveness but the two are so different with regard to emphasis and approach.

In the Old Testament lesson, Nathan comes to David and reproaches his behavior. Nathan knows that he is sent by God and, therefore, acts in the true tradition of the prophets of the Old Testament. His role is to denounce David's sin, to spell it out and to show its seriousness. In order to be able to have the woman he desires, David sent her husband to a sure death. This is a very serious offense: it is in direct contempt of God's trust in David.

To prove his point, Nathan goes on at length to enumerate all the graces David has received from God. How ungrateful! How unworthy! For Nathan, God must punish David. The prophetic pronouncement goes beyond merely setting up a trial and judgment. God does not want the death of a sinner but his conversion. Nathan's purpose is not only to compel David to repent, to confess his sin, and to accept his punishment but also and mainly to proclaim God's forgiveness.

In the beautiful story that St. Luke tells us, things are different. Christ is in the midst of the Pharisees who invited him to a meal. Then, a woman, who obviously was not invited, joins them. No name is given. All we know is that the woman has a bad reputation in town. I am sure that her arrival has thrown a cold spell in the room. Everybody freezes, feels embarrassed especially when the woman begins to do all kinds of things unthinkable in such a gathering such as sitting near Jesus, kissing and anointing his feet.

Simon, Jesus' host, cannot help but think: "If this man were a prophet, he would have known what kind of person this woman is." Simon's reaction is normal. For him, the true model of the prophet in such a circumstance is Nathan. Jesus' attitude is so different. Jesus does not put the woman on trial. He does not act like Nathan did or, as a matter of fact, like many parents or educators do when they disapprove of a child's behavior. He does not remind the woman of all the things God has done for her. On the contrary, he even seems to question the reaction of those who, like Simon, live a righteous life. No wonder Simon is perplexed. He is confused because he misses the point. Jesus does not attempt to condone, justify or excuse the sinner like we are wont to do with our own psychological theories to minimize personal responsibility. Not at all. Jesus knows that the woman is a sinner but he also knows that he came for the sinners.

This is why Jesus approaches the situation from a new angle. He knows what Simon is thinking. Jesus then tells him a story, the story of the creditor and the debtors and he asks Simon to comment on the story. "You are right", says Jesus. Thus, Jesus transforms his audience from passive spectators to active participants as each one of us in Church this morning should be. The story, to be of value to us, is to be situated on a psychological level, not theological. It not necessary to commit many sins to experience God's love but it is necessary to be aware that to all of us, I repeat, to all of us, God has much to forgive.

Jesus then brings back our attention on the woman to be looked at from a new perspective and in a new light. She is no longer a subject of condemnation but of admiration, admiration for the work performed in her by God. "You see this woman", says Jesus, "I came to your house and you did not pour water over my feet. Look what she has done for me." Jesus makes Simon understand that, unlike the woman, he has shown little love.

"For this reason, I tell you that her sins must have been forgiven her; otherwise she would not have shown such a great love. It is the man who is forgiven little who shows little love." Love is the consequence and the sign of forgiveness.

It is because the woman realized that there was so much in her life to be forgiven that she shows great love. Forgiveness is the answer to need and despair: the need to be close to God and the despair when one feels separated from Him. Simon does not think that there is much need for forgiveness in his life, hence, there is little expression of love.

Jesus' message for us is very clear: the more we realize our shortcomings and the more we see in our life "all the things which we ought to have done and all those things which we ought not to have done", the more we shall be grateful to God for the forgiveness He grants to all who truly repent. The greater our gratitude the fuller our love.

St. Luke could have stopped the story right there but he wants to go further. He plunges us into the basic element required to make us aware of our need for forgiveness in order to experience the joy of reconciliation: Faith. Jesus dismissed the woman by these words "Your faith has saved you."

Disciple of St. Paul, Luke knows the battles that his mentor fought to have his contemporaries accept the new message that we are saved not by what we do but by what

God does in us - what He does to the heart of a sinner who is willing to let himself/herself be transformed by His love. Faith is the acceptance of the salvation that God is freely and generously giving us through Jesus Christ. But this salvation is not static, confined to the individual.

To be saved by God means that we are reinstated into a profound relationship with him. All of us must have experiences of reconciliation with persons whom we love and whom we have hurt. When the reconciliation takes place it seems that a heavy weight is removed from our being. We feel at peace, free, full of joy. Our love for the person we have offended is even increased and enlivened. We cannot help but show how much we love him or her. This is what Jesus meant when he said: "Go in peace". God's peace is the certainty that the broken relationship has been restored.

I do pray that each one of us endeavor to have that experience in our spiritual adventure with Christ so that, full of joy, we go into the world in peace, spreading around us the love and forgiveness that God grants to us all - not judging, not condemning, just forgiving. If we are convinced that much has been forgiven of us, our footsteps will necessarily follow Christ on His way to the cross and glory.