

**LET YOUR SINS BE STRONG
BUT LET YOUR TRUST IN CHRIST BE STRONGER**

Luke 7:36-8:3 & 1 Kings 21:1-29

Mark Twain once claimed to have sent a dozen of his friends a telegram saying, “*flee at once – all is discovered.*” They all left town immediately. People are fond of saying “*I have nothing to hide.*” I don’t believe it. Most of us have a great deal to hide. And the few people I’ve met whose lives are truly an open book, generally don’t have the good sense to know when to censor themselves. I sometimes wish such people would offer less self-disclosure.

Which of us has not done something, that if we had been caught doing it, would have been punishable by law? I haven’t met anyone for whom these words in the Rite 1 confession don’t apply – “*we have erred and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep, we have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts, we have offended against thy holy laws, we have left undone those things which we ought to have done and we have done those things which we ought not to have done.*” That’s our predicament exactly. Many of us, if recipients of a message such as Mark Twain is purported to have sent to his friends, might have cause to flee.

There are two obvious sinners in our scripture lessons this morning: King Ahab and the woman who rubbed perfumed oil on Jesus’ feet and dried them with her own hair. King Ahab is a true portrait of an arrogant scoundrel. The spoiled king in his palace whose subject Naboth refused to sell him his family’s vineyard, pouted in his room and wouldn’t eat because he didn’t get his way. Ahab let his wife Jezebeel take care of this little problem and gladly assented to Naboth’s false accusation and murder. As soon as he heard that Naboth was dead Ahab went to take ownership of the vineyard. If the scene in 1 Kings were a play someone would need to go out with a placard saying *boo* and *hiss* whenever Ahab took the stage. Rightly the great prophet Elijah confronted and condemned him.

If we were to read on in the narrative of 1 Kings we would expect to read of Ahab getting his violent and well-deserved punishment. Only, he doesn’t. It’s fascinating to read what happens next to Ahab, because it’s so unexpected and out of character. Ahab repents. In 1 Kings 21:27-29 we read,

When Ahab heard those words (of Elijah), he tore his clothes and put sackcloth over his bare flesh; he fasted, lay in the sackcloth, and went about dejectedly. Then the word of the Lord came to Elijah the Tishbite: “Have you seen how Ahab has humbled himself before me? Because he has humbled himself before me, I will not bring the disaster in his days; but in his son’s days I will bring the disaster on his house.

The other obvious sinner in today’s scripture lessons is the weeping woman who appears in the house of Simon the Pharisee, while Jesus and his disciples are at supper. Commentators love to speculate what kind of sinner this woman was. Many assume she

was a prostitute because of Simon's reaction to her and the way she was labeled and known as "a sinner." But neither Jesus nor Luke the Gospel writer seem interested in what kinds of sins she committed. What matters to them is that she recognizes how very much she has been forgiven and how deeply grateful she is.

The other character in the Gospel story is the host – Simon the Pharisee. I can imagine him with his arms folded playing the role of cynical judge, thinking to himself that Jesus couldn't be much of a prophet if he didn't recognize what sort of woman was touching him, pouring perfumed oils on his feet, wiping them with her own hair and bathing them in her tears.

Many have told me over the years in essence that they believe Christianity is a religion whose purpose is to make us good. They believe that Jesus was a moral teacher showing us the way to lead faithful and moral lives. Anyone who thinks that way must be just as perplexed by this Gospel story as Simon seems to be by Jesus' behavior.

Nothing could be further from the truth of Christianity than to think of it as a *moral* religion, as a means to make us do the right things and be better persons. Christianity's purpose is not to make us better persons, but rather to bring us to our knees. The purpose of Christianity is not to help us try harder to be better persons but to realize how far short we fall of God's intention for us. The light of Christianity begins to break through for me only when I realize that I am a sinner. I am fallen and broken and far apart from God and I desperately need his grace. I am not one who owes a mere 50 denarii, or even 500. I am someone who owes thousands and thousands, but am totally bankrupt and cannot ever hope to pay back that debt.

Martin Luther, who started the Protestant reformation, understood this when he wrote to his friend and colleague Philipp Melancthon:

Sin boldly! But believe more boldly still... God does not save those who are only imaginary sinners. Be a sinner, and let your sins be strong, but let your trust in Christ be stronger, and rejoice in Christ who is the victor over sin, death and the world.

"Let your sins be strong, but let your trust in Christ be stronger." That's the gospel theme for us this morning, to recognize ourselves as *sinners* and to join with Ahab in acknowledging and repenting of our wrong doing. We are also invited to join with the woman weeping at Jesus' feet in gratitude for the mercy and forgiveness we have received.

The good news is that we are forgiven. We are loved. We are sought after. Like the shepherd who leaves the flock of 99 to find and carry home that one lost lamb Christ has sought you out to carry you home. I like what Archbishop Desmond Tutu said several weeks ago at our diocesan bishop Ian Douglas' consecration: "*God doesn't only seek out lost lambs he also goes after the recalcitrant old ram and stubborn ewe.*" You and I have every bit as much cause to weep in gratitude at Jesus' feet as that woman who crashed

Simon's party. The grace and love we have received is audacious, unwarranted and unlimited.

As Mark Twain is supposed to have written in that telegram: *all is discovered*. God knows our hearts. God is already well acquainted with our failings and our many failures. We are fooling ourselves if we think we can pull anything over on the God who is everywhere present and knows all things, even the thoughts and intentions of our hearts. *All is discovered*.

But the good news is that we don't have to flee. God is not interested in exposing our shame. God is interested in loving us and making us whole. We are each part of a broken creation, a fallen world. God wants to heal us and make the whole creation new. Is there any better reason to follow that unnamed woman's blessed example and weep in gratitude?