

How Do You Spell Discernment?

Luke 7:36 - 8:3

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Over the years, I have come to more and more appreciate the Biblical witness, the Bible. I'm not sure why but it used to be that I really shied away from trying to confront it, struggle with it, dig for meaning within its many stories. Now I keep coming back to it as a source of challenge and a foundation for faith and how we construct it. When I read pericopes or passages like this one we read today, I realize how rich a foundation this faith document is.

This story, found only in Luke though the Gospels of Matthew and Mark have similar ones, is a story of hospitality, social etiquette, and discernment of God's presence. The story is based in one of those important social events in which even today we participate – the dinner party. Jesus is invited by a Pharisee named Simon to dinner. As they're eating a woman enters the scene and begins to wash Jesus feet with her hair, her tears, and some ointment. It is a story filled with "stuff" from which we may draw meaning and challenge as we examine it and consider how from it we might grow in faith.

Some quick reminders about this text before we dig too far into it; Meals in first century Palestine as today in Madison were important social occasions. Invitations to share in a meal were then as now an important barometer of relationships. Unlike now, meals then were segregated by sex so that men ate and women served. And Jesus was at the home of a local member of the Pharisees. Now the Pharisees were the religious liberals of the day for they didn't limit their religious understanding to the temple or synagogue nor did they seek to simply follow the rules and laws of the Torah. The Pharisees, while believing that the Torah's various laws ought be followed, sought to interpret them and live them out in their social lives as well as their religious ones. The Sadducees sought to limit such to the synagogue or temple and to the written Torah. For the Pharisees, there was much to be learned from the writings but in addition, there was an oral tradition of interpretation which carried as much weight. Jesus was the guest of one for whom oral tradition and its continuing evolution was celebrated and embraced.

For a host, the welcoming of the guest would or should include water for the washing of the feet or a servant, if one were wealthy, to perform this action and ointment for the hair. We ought remember that this was a hot, Mediterranean climate with unpaved roads populated with animals whose proof of passing often included droppings mixed with the dust. Feet became dirty and the welcoming coolness of water upon them could not help but make one feel welcome. And the ointment for the hair would offer the same for the head as well as a masking of the odor of sweat and lack of regular opportunities to bathe. Failure to provide either of these would mark one as either a poor host or one who simply wished one's guests would depart soon! It would be along the lines of not taking a guests coat in Madison in January!

Into this scene of half fulfilled hospitality comes a woman of the City. The language used probably indicates that she was a prostitute and her presence can be hardly welcome by the host. However, what she does is nothing short of amazing. She abrogates the host duties for herself. She in effect becomes the host tossing out all the social expectations and/or niceties of the day.

She fulfills the role and more as she doesn't simply provide water but washes Jesus' feet with her hair and tears and puts ointment upon them. The host, Simon the Pharisee, assumes that if Jesus knew who this was that he would be offended and push her away. His expectation is that any self-respecting prophet would know who this woman was – a sinner, and reject her! Jesus counters by seeking to teach with a brief parable of a lender forgiving the debt of two- one of whom whose debt was ten times the amount of the other! And Jesus declares that the woman's sins are forgiven without her requesting such or following any ceremonies or prescribed acts of contrition. Grace is offered without preconditions.

For the early church or those to whom Luke was written, this story would offer that despite their situation and treatment by even the liberal religious establishment, hope was offered through faith and the very social structures which were used to keep them from celebrating that faith would be turned on their heads. The people who believed in Jesus as Christ, as messiah would triumph just as the woman did as she became the host of this meal.

Secondly, the story also reminded the readers, hearers of the time that nothing separated them from God's presence. It was key to them that they would know that even if the religious establishment of the day failed to understand or recognize that their faith was legitimate, God was with them as God was with the woman who dared to prostrate herself. Forgiveness and/or salvation meant God's presence.

And lastly for these readers, hearers this story offered them hope that no sins were so great as not to be forgiven. Even this one whom they were told was a prostitute could be forgiven. Grace abounds.

For us, I would hope we might draw from this story three rather simple ideas and refer to them as we work our way through the discernment process as well as our everyday lives. First our faith calls us to lead our lives in a different manner from those around us. We are called to live with an intensity and a commitment. Not only in our "churchly" duties such as participation in the life of this congregation but in our everyday lives, that intensity and that commitment is a witness to God's presence and participation. In our story, Simon the Pharisee welcomed in a half-hearted way this person Jesus into his home. The woman of the street welcomed him with intensity and commitment. She dared to ignore the social expectations and mores of the time to live out her faith and her commitment. Acting out that faith, she wasn't seeking anything except the opportunity to act. Remember she didn't say "if I do this will I get recognition, forgiveness, plaudits of any kind". She simply did what she believed to be the right thing. Internally, our discernment process will offer us the opportunity not to fulfill some preconceived notions but to think out loud and converse about what we believe this congregation ought be doing and how it might be done. The discernment process should be viewed not as a process which fulfills a requirement or is a means to gain personal recognition. It is a process in which each of us will be asked to respond to the simple question "where is God calling us to be, what is God calling us to do". And our responses should reflect our intensity and our commitment.

Secondly, this story is also a reminder that part of our recognizing God's participation in this place involves listening and enabling the participation of all regardless. We need listen to and for the voices of those who are often ignored, denigrated, and/or denied in their attempt to

witness to God's presence. We are called to listen and celebrate that God's presence can be known by all. Listening in this manner can be problematic for it calls upon all of us to respect and embrace the other. And we cannot, we ought not seek to deny that our voices will not always be in harmony. What we need do is listen and discern that which we believe to be God's call, God's participation even if it requires we turn expectations on their head. It doesn't mean we ignore practicality or the safety or sensibility of others but it does mean we have the courage to assure that all have the opportunity for dialogue, conversation for we know that God's presence is available to and for all.

And lastly, and maybe the greatest challenge is to know that just as God forgives my sins and continues to participate in my life, God also forgives and participates with others. Grace is unlimited and it is so hard to recognize and celebrate that. During the coming months, we will have the opportunity to live that out as we converse and dialogue with one another. May God's presence be celebrated in each of our lives and may we dare to celebrate that presence in the lives of others. AMEN.