

Stewardship is a Kiss

Sermon Preached at Foundry United Methodist Church

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Genesis 28:10-22

Luke 7:36-8:3

The story begins in an ordinary way. Jesus had been invited to a dinner party. (Apparently the Lord and Savior and Master of the Universe liked to go to parties. It seems as though he never turned down an invitation to a party, or to a wedding reception.)

So Jesus had been invited to a party in the home of Simon the Pharisee: Simon, the Methodist; Simon, the good Episcopalian; Simon, the proper Southern Baptist; Simon, the Pharisee; Simon, the person who believed what his religion taught him to believe, even when it was hard to believe in; Simon, the person who followed the rules of his religion, even when the rules were hard to follow; Simon, the religious man of duty and responsibility. Simon had invited Jesus to his home for a dinner party.

In those days people ate a little differently than we do now; they didn't use chairs to eat dinner. The table was low and close to the floor and people would lean down on one arm, prop themselves up and use the other hand to dip into the food with their bread. People would recline with their feet out in back of them and they would talk and leisurely eat dinner together.

And the atmosphere of people's homes during the party was a little different in that time and place than it is now. People left their doors open; there wasn't much privacy. Everybody who lived in the neighborhood was a relative of some kind, an in-law or a cousin. People wandered through each others homes all the time.

So the story begins in an ordinary enough way with Jesus reclined at table waiting to eat, his feet stretched out behind him, and with people wandering through Simon the Pharisee's home. Then a woman comes into Simon's house comes, a woman whom Luke tells us was a sinner. The fact that Luke points out that she was a sinner means that her life was such that everyone in the community considered her to be a sinner. Luke doesn't tell us why. She apparently was not able to live according to the proprieties of the society of her time and so Luke tells us she was a sinner. Biblical scholars have assumed that she may have been a prostitute, but Luke doesn't tell us that.

For good Pharisees--for Methodists, for proper Episcopalians, for a Southern Baptists - there's a lot of ways to be considered a sinner. She need not have been a prostitute. She could have been someone who was divorced and living with a man without benefit of marriage. They would have considered her a sinner for that.

She may have been part of a messy divorce. She may have been a lesbian. In that time and place they would have considered her a sinner if she were a lesbian. She may have been someone's mistress.

Or maybe it wasn't about sex at all. Maybe she had embezzled. Maybe she had stolen. Maybe she was a kleptomaniac. Maybe she was addicted to something. She may have been mental ill; there would have been Pharisees, Methodists, Episcopalians and Southern Baptists who would have considered that a sin.

We don't know why people thought she was a sinner; we just know that there was no doubt in anyone's mind in the room that she was a sinner.

Simon's door was open and she walked in, and she brought with her an alabaster jar of ointment. Precious ointment.

This was the custom in those days: one of the things that people feared the most was that they would be embarrassed after their death. They worried that between the time they died and the time they were buried their physical bodies might become an embarrassment and so they saved, in alabaster jars, ointment that would be used to perfume their bodies during the time between their death and burial. The ointment was very expensive. People tended to buy it, a quarter of a teaspoon at a time, whenever they had any money left over. They would collect it throughout a lifetime hoping there would be enough to take care of their bodies after they died. This ointment, this perfume, also became their savings account. Because if things got really, really tight they could sell a quarter of a teaspoon to someone else to help them make it through the next week or the next month.

This woman had brought with her, her life savings in an alabaster jar and she clearly brought it meaning to anoint Jesus's head in appreciation for whatever Jesus meant to her. Somehow Jesus' presence had touched her in such a way that she, whom everyone considered a sinner, felt accepted, understood and affirmed by Jesus. She was so grateful that she had brought this alabaster jar of her life savings to Simon's house when she had heard that Jesus was there and had taken the risk of intruding on the party in order to anoint Jesus' head. But she never made it.

She got as far as his feet reclined out behind him and she dropped to her knees and begin to weep. She wept so much that she wet Jesus' feet with her tears. Jesus' feet were wet and she wanted to dry them and she had brought no towel with her to dry them, so she used her long hair to dry Jesus' feet. Then, she began to wipe the ointment she brought for his head onto his feet and she began to kiss Jesus' feet.

Simon, the Pharisee--the Methodist, the proper Episcopalian, the Southern Baptist--the one who always followed the rules, raised his eyebrows. Jesus must not be much of a prophet if he doesn't know the kind of woman this is who is touching him in this way, he thought.

Jesus, knowing Simon's thoughts, said to him, Simon, Pharisee--Methodist, Episcopalian, Southern Baptist - when I came to your house you didn't wash my feet. You didn't greet me with a kiss. Simon, man of duty and responsibility. You thought Simon, that you were doing me a favor by having me to your house to eat. But this woman who knows what she has received from God, who knows how much in spite of herself she has been loved understood and accepted, has washed my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair and has not stopped kissing my feet since she has come here.

Simon, you need to understand that this woman is forgiven much; she has loved much and she has been saved. While you, Simon, Pharisee--Methodist, Episcopalian, Southern Baptist--man of duty, you will sadly never know such depth of grace, acceptance and love.

Stewardship is a kiss. Stewardship is not an act of duty and obligation that we do because the church needs money.

Stewardship is a kiss. Stewardship in the broadest and deepest sense of the word is a kiss. The stewardship of the earth is a kiss. The Stewardship of our national heritage is a kiss. The stewardship of this city is a kiss. The stewardship of our family is a kiss. The stewardship of our time and our talent is a kiss.

Beth Norcross, a member of this congregation attending Wesley Seminary, worked in the environmental movement before she began her seminary work. She has become convinced that trying to persuade us that it is our duty to take care of the earth isn't working. No matter how much we yammer at one another about this, we still eat away at the ozone layer and pile up toxic waste.

Beth has become convinced that the way we need to help one another to practice good stewardship of the earth is to love the earth, to find God's spirit in the very nature we keep violating. So that we might take care of the world, not out of some sense of duty and obligation, which doesn't seem to work, but so that we might be moved to take care of the world because we love this gift of creation that God has given us.

Jane and I, we pay our taxes to the city of Washington, D.C. with no complaints. We love this city. We love to walk our neighborhood on Capital Hill. We love to be in Dupont Circle on a Friday evening. Every year our appraisal and our property tax has gone up the maximum amount allowable under the law and we've never once found ourselves complaining about it. We would pay more taxes to the District of Columbia. We love this city.

We give, as a kiss, as an act of love.

For most of my life I've been a person of duty and responsibility. I gave to the church because the church needed money in order to do its ministry. We have tried to explain our hopes to expand our ministry next year and how we intend to spend the money you donate. We've tried to explain why we're asking you to give, and why we're asking you to consider increasing your giving if it is possible for you to do so. But I want you to know that's not the reason that I think we give. We give out of a sense of gratitude and appreciation for the presence of God in our lives. We give because we love God.

The story about Jacob from Genesis interests me. Jacob was a cheat. He cheated his brother out of his birthright. He cheated his father-in-law out of his flock. Jacob got everything he could in life, any way that he could get it, and he had very good reason to assume that God had given up on him. Then, one night God appeared to him in a dream and Jacob discovered to his surprise that God was still present in his life. On the spot he made a commitment that he would tithe everything he had to God, in appreciation for God not having given up on him.

The interesting thing to me about this story is that, at the time that Jacob made a pledge to God to tithe, there was nothing to give to. There was nothing to give to. There was no temple, no priesthood, no mission, no ministry. There was no way to give to God. Israel had to build a temple in order to have something to give to. It wasn't that the temple, priesthood, mission and ministry needed money; it was that people needed to give something back to God in gratitude. They had to create the ministry so there would be something to give to.

Jane and I pledge what we believe, based on our math, is a tithe: This year our pledge has been \$250 a week. We have decided to increase that next year to \$275 a week, which we think may be a little more than a tithe. I hope so. I hope it is more than a tithe.

I don't want to give based on some rule. I want to give instead out of a sense of gratitude. I want my giving to grow out of a sense of amazement that, despite myself, God is present in my life in a way that 10 or 20 years ago, I would have not imagined. Ten years ago I lived my life mostly out of a sense of obligation and duty. I want to give today out of a sense of love.

Stewardship isn't about the church's need to get; it is about our need to give. It is my assumption that in order to be whole, we need to give. Giving is a kiss, it is an act of love and it draws us closer to God.