

11th Sunday in Ordinary Time cycle C

To what extent should the motivation for our actions be what people think of us? In the Gospel this weekend, we are presented with the woman who is only identified by Luke as “a sinful woman.” But apparently she was somewhat of a notorious sinner, because everyone there at the dinner seemed to know what she was guilty of. However, it was not her sins that sent tongues a-wagging; it was her behavior towards Jesus. We get the condensed rendition of the story, but can easily imagine how it all might have transpired: the sinful woman, out of her element yet determined to draw close to Jesus; the Pharisees shying away from them both, getting out of earshot, and then rendering the judgments: in modern parlance, probably thinking things like “look at her, I can’t believe that she has the audacity to come here, how much do you suppose that oil cost, my gosh, she’s even wiping his feet with her hair, how over the top is that?” She would have been getting the looks, she would have been getting the comments; but you know what? She didn’t care. Her faith saved her because she didn’t care about what those Pharisees and so-called “righteous” people thought, she knew how grateful she was for her Savior, and she knew how much she loved him, and she cared about her behavior towards him.

She could very easily have been wrapped up in all sorts of worldly things. She could have been all concerned about how much that ointment cost; she could have thought, well, I’ll be just as forgiven if I save my money and don’t spend it on this gesture, others get forgiven without spending a thing, and Jesus himself says that it’s faith that gains us forgiveness; she could have been concerned about what all those people thought about how she spent her money; but she didn’t care about the cost. She could have cared about what people thought of her; one thing to actually show up, and she could well have thought that maybe she should just stay home, accept her salvation and her Savior but not intrude on this gathering; she could have fretted over what they were saying over there in the corner, about how they were passing judgment on her *behavior towards Jesus* as much as they did her behavior in the past; but she didn’t care what they thought. She could have cared about herself: not that I could now, but I don’t see me drying somebody’s feet with my hair, they make towels for that sort of thing; honestly, her hair would have gotten pretty messed up, especially with that oil in it; it couldn’t have been comfortable to bend down like that; her show of appreciation was physically challenging, belittling, and frankly humbling; she could have decided on a far easier gesture of her love rather than going through this; she didn’t care about what it demanded of her. And Luke relates this to us as a lesson in faith; in the end, Jesus does not tell the woman that her devotion saved her, or that her extravagant gestures saved her, or that her humbling of self had saved her; he says “your faith has saved you; go in peace.”

What then is this faith that this woman has, because not once in the story does she profess with words her belief in Jesus, in either his identity or in his mission as the Messiah. That’s because

faith is not the same thing as belief. Belief is a part of faith, but it's not all of faith. Many people believe in Jesus, but don't necessarily follow him. I don't know how many times I've heard people proclaim that they believe in God, and my response, at least internally, is "big woo; the devils believe in Jesus, but they hate him!" You can believe in Jesus for all your life, but that won't be enough to save one. And faith is not the same as love: many have affection for Jesus, but just won't accept that he is God, or that he conquered death, or that he truly resurrected; they think that he's a nice idea, and they wish that all the events of his life really happened, and love the very thought of him, but won't conform their lives because they just don't know if they can accept that this is true; and they would hate to throw away their one shot at this world's pleasures on something that they're afraid won't have a payoff in the end. Faith, then, is where belief and love converge. You take a gift freely given us by God, add our assent and a conversion in our lives, and you have faith. And the result of faith is: we don't care. All of a sudden, we don't care about things like cost, about what worldly types think of our behavior, about how personally demanding following the commandments may be at times, don't care about denying ourselves or losing independence or identity. We don't care anymore, because we've got faith, which means that we've got Jesus, which means that we've got heaven to look forward to, which means what we've got more in our possession than the world could ever give.

There is a balance that we have to achieve with our lives; we only have so many hours in the day, and the time spent on one endeavor, by necessity, has to come from time that could be spent elsewhere. Limited with time become our thoughts, our good deeds, our prayers; life is truly a balancing act. And so it is with the things we care about, the spiritual and the material. The more one end of the scale rises, the more the other tends to drop. The less we care about expensive gadgets and vacations and clothing, the more money we have for the works of God and for the poor in our midst. Like the sinful woman in the Gospel, the less we care about gaining the approval of the culture we live in and the favor and attention of those around us, the more we can care about doing what's pleasing to God. The less we care about what this or that action costs me in terms of time and effort, the more we will be free to serve God. We are challenged to care very deeply about the principles set out for us in the Gospels; but we will begin by caring less about those things which are not connected to the teachings of Christ, or which may actually be antithetical to the teachings of Christ. But keep in mind that this isn't a negative which we're pursuing; God isn't calling us to be destitute, what he wants is for us to be generous; he isn't saying that we should act all self-righteous, but simply to be holy. He isn't asking us to be careless with our health, our jobs, our family time, our lives, so that we can a hundred hours a week to the Church; but he does want us to be giving of our time, so that the works done through his Church may flourish.

The first reading from 1st Samuel told one of many stories of King David. King David, although a great hero, was not a perfect man, and this passage tells the tale of one of his greatest

imperfections, arranging for the death of an innocent man, driven by his lust for the man's wife. Not one of his stellar moments; and yet, to the end, King David is presented to the Israelites as "a man after God's own heart." Even though David broke some other commandments along the way, the one thing he never did, the one thing he was never accused of, was worshiping false gods; he never wavered in his love for the one true God who revealed himself to Moses and to Abraham. David sinned; but he also humbled himself greatly as king to atone for his sins. Even when his own family and his closest friends told him that his behavior when he humbled himself was unbecoming a man of his rank, he didn't care: his concern in the end was having things right with God. If you believe in Christ and love him, truly on both counts, the result will be faith. And as did the faith of the sinful woman, our faith will sometimes have those around us wagging their tongues, questioning our motives, and thinking us crazy for giving up the pleasures and treasures of this world in hope of a world to come. Oh well, who cares? It is a great grace to care less about fleeting fortunes which will evaporate at the end of life's day, because it opens up the possibility that we may care more about the outcome we will have in eternity. Like the sinful woman who wasn't interested in what the Pharisees thought, may we be found pleasing to God; may our faith show forth both our beliefs and our love; and may our love direct our lives away from sin, that we may please ever better the Savior who redeemed us.

Copyright © 2007