



The New England Church Pulpit

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The Harmony of Justice and Love

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Christianity

Luke 7:36-50

One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and Jesus went into the Pharisee's house and took his place at the table. And a woman in the city, who was a prostitute, having learned that he was eating in that house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment. Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him—that she is a prostitute. Jesus spoke up and said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you: a certain creditor had two debtors: one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he cancelled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?" Simon answered, "I suppose this one for whom he canceled the greater debt." And Jesus said to him, "You have judged rightly." Then turning toward the woman, he said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little." Then he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?" And he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

Judaism

Talmud, Nedarim 9.4

Who takes vengeance or bears a grudge acts like one who, having cut one hand while handling a knife, avenges himself by stabbing the other hand.

There is an oft-repeated, though misinformed, theology that the Old Testament is about God's justice and the New Testament is about God's love. Or sometimes stated that the old is about God's judgment but the new is about God's grace. But even the nomenclature we give the two parts of our Bible is a deception, and sometimes gives rise to this notion. "Old" is antiquated, out-of-date; and "new" overrides old because it is assumed to be more up-to-date on God's ways.

Nothing could be further from the truth. There is no divide between the God of the old and God of the new, and in fact, it would be better to refer to these parts as the Hebrew Bible and the Christian Bible. And there is no divide between God's justice and God's mercy, or between God's judgment and God's grace. God is love, which means the justice and mercy, judgment and love are all rolled up into one entity we call the divine. But since God's ways are not our ways, it's difficult to grasp the concept.

Remember that judgment isn't necessarily about condemnation; we can be judged to be right just as much as we can be judged as being wrong. Remember, too, that even being judged as wrong doesn't mean that retributive punishment necessarily follows that declaration.

And to that point, we have this story in Luke's gospel of Jesus in the home of Simon. That Jesus is invited in the home of Simon the Pharisee is curious enough to begin with, but the story gets curiousest and curiousest, as Alice exclaimed in the strange world of Wonderland. As everyone took their place at the table, this woman of the street enters, assumingly uninvited, and began to wash Jesus's feet with tears and ointment and dry them with her hair. The use of the word "feet" in the Bible is often a euphemistic reference to some sexual context, and while we don't want to stretch the image too far, given this woman's reputation, it might have some significance in the story. It certainly would explain Simon the Pharisee's reaction to this woman's attention to Jesus. Her manner of affection for Jesus was perhaps all she knew; Simon judged her harshly for her sinful activity, but Jesus judges her with love.

In Marilynne Robinson's book *Gilead* she writes:

Calvin says somewhere that each of us is an actor on a stage and God is the audience. That metaphor has always interested me, because it makes us artists of our behavior, and the reaction of God to us might be thought to be aesthetic rather than morally judgmental. I like Calvin's image because it suggests how God might actually enjoy us."

We get the distinct impression that Jesus actually enjoyed, rather than just tolerated, the company of this woman.

The irony of the story leaps out at us as we read. Here is a Pharisee, a strict observer of God's laws, who is less gracious than the woman, who doesn't obey any of the laws, but who treats Jesus with extraordinary gratitude and reverence. Simon is incensed that Jesus does not stop her, and indeed, Simon concludes that since Jesus does not perceive who she really is and eschew her antics of affection, Jesus is no prophet. Simon asks Jesus: do you know who this woman is? Jesus asks Simon: do you see this woman? One looks at her in terms of her merit; the other in terms of God's love.

And then Jesus turns the table on Simon, criticizing the Pharisee and extoling the actions of the prostitute: "you gave me no water for my feet when I entered your house, which, as host, you should have; she hasn't stopped bathing my feet with her tears. And has even dried them with her hair. You gave me no kiss when I came in but she has not stopped kissing my feet since she came in. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore I tell you, that though her sins are many, they are forgiven. Simon is incensed that Jesus not only lets her ply her trade in his house but actually thanks her for doing it.

Simon sees the woman's reputation; Jesus sees the woman. Simon has his own version of justice that is based on merit. Jesus's justice is based on mercy; it is love laced with grace. Jesus knows the human condition, how we make mistakes; how the searing effects of shame and guilt weigh us down; how we defeat ourselves because of internal confusions and turmoil. Jesus knows that this is the only way she knows how to show affection. We often miss that subtly in others.

On the other side of the coin, we are incensed that God does not act more decisively in thwarting obvious evil that creates hell on earth. There are holes in the fabric of justice into which people fall and in which people can be destroyed. Where is God when that happens? It is an enigma; there is no satisfying answer to that question. But perhaps it is the wrong question. When asked where God was during the Holocaust, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel said the question is not where is God, but rather where are the **people** of God? God depends on people to carry out divine will. When an accused rapist only gets three months for his heinous crime, it isn't God's fault that a judge unsympathetic to the victim shirks his duty.

We know about these gaps, these holes. We experience them; we see them. In those holes are women needing safe abortions. In those holes are children who need nutritional food in schools. In those holes are people caught in violence and wars that force them to become refugees. In those holes are people who identify with a gender that is different from the one foisted upon them by their physical bodies. In those holes are a myriad lonely people who don't fit into the mainstream for some mysterious reason and who don't find living in the margin very fulfilling.

So it comes down to the biblical imperative in the Hebrew Bible that admonishes us to do justice and love mercy. We are called to walk the fine line between retributive justice and remedial justice, between justice that requires consequences for wrongdoing and mercy that honors human life as God intended it. It is a difficult and often impossible task for humans to accomplish. Jesus admonishes Simon for his prejudices even as Jesus recognizes that the woman herself has many sins. But the holy justice that is centered in love and mercy offers forgiveness for both.

Do you remember the incident in the movie *It's A Wonderful Life* when Mr. Potter, played so brilliantly by veteran actor Lionel Barrymore discovers that the money George Bailey's uncle Billy was to deposit in the bank has ended up in Potter's newspaper? The fact that Mr. Potter did not return the money, and therefore caused the old Savings and Loan Company the Bailey's owned to go bankrupt was never addressed in the movie. There was a hue and cry from the movie-going public at the time because Mr. Potter didn't get his comeuppance. The public was incensed that justice was not meted out to Mr. Potter, and to be sure, Potter got away with the default crime. It was one of those holes in the fabric of justice. But the movie emphasized a far greater tenet of social justice when all of George Bailey's neighbors, and even the bank creditor, chipped in to keep the bank open. Love and mercy supplanted the need for retribution, and ultimately won the day. It is the people like you and me who can help bridge the gaps.

Poet and psychologist Bonaro Overstreet puts it this way:

*You say the little efforts that I make will do no good:
they will never prevail to tip the hovering scale
where justice hangs in balance.
I don't think I ever thought they would.
But I am prejudiced beyond debate
in favor of my right to choose which side
shall feel the stubborn ounces of my weight.*

Amen.

--Gary L. McCann

PASTORAL PRAYER

Our father in heaven, we offer our thanksgivings today for all that makes life enjoyable. For green grass and rain that nourishes it; for breezes that blow on hot summer days; for carefree children playing joyfully as adults watch over them. Our mother in heaven, we offer up our prayers of hope that daily activities in which we are routinely involved will be meaningful and with holy purpose. Eternal Spirit, whose purpose and whose laws pervade this universe and make of it one world, we offer ourselves today, that we may be aligned with those things that would bring unity and peace in this world in which we are privileged to live.

Give us faith that we may abide the cynicism that would easily beset us; give us faith to overcome the maladies of mind and moods of the spirit that spoil our lives; give us courage to abandon the apathy that can undermine our good purpose.

We pray that your kingdom will come, that your will may be done on earth as in heaven. Instill within us the values of your realm that will shun obsession with things that matter little and embrace the values Jesus brought to people of this earth, namely love, integrity, equality, hope and peace. In this year of a presidential election, give us a spiritual discernment that would sort through the political hype to choose the best candidate for our country and for our country as it promotes peace and freedom in the world.

Give to those on this earth the daily bread they need, both literally and figuratively. We know there is enough food in this world for all to eat well if those who control the food will be generous. Give us the bread of hope as well, that when we are faced with death, when we are confronted with violence, when we are surrounded by hatred we will know your eternal sense of well-being.

We come to proclaim the power and the glory and the realm of all that exists is yours, and we are privileged to enjoy it and be responsible participants and co-creators with you in its future. Through the Christ who taught us this prayer, Amen.