

A Powerful Performance

4th Sunday after Pentecost

Luke 7:36—8:3

“Dad, watch me! Dad, look what I can do!” These were the words that I heard from a six year old boy swinging from the bars on a handrail positioned along a sidewalk as I was walking along. With both hands firmly gripped onto the top of the two bars that were parallel to each other, this boy took two steps back, lunged forward and spun himself in between the two bars and around the top bar. Now, I know that the mothers in the crowd are probably gasping right now as they think about all that could have gone wrong in that situation. Not the least of which, the boy hitting his head on one of the bars. I tell you though; the first thought that went through my mind was, “Pretty impressive for a six year old!” Kids will do this, won’t they? They will put themselves in harms way to impress Dad. Climb trees. Do bike tricks. Perform daring dances. They love to perform for their parents’ attention, affection, and approval. Also, out of great love and appreciation for their parents, they respond with tokens of their love. “Dad, watch me! Dad, look what I can do!”

Today in our Gospel reading we witnessed a couple of performances. Simon the Pharisee “wines and dines” Jesus while a woman, a sinful woman, as she is called, washes the feet of Jesus with expensive ointment and dries them with the very hairs on her head. We might hesitate a little to call the actions of these two characters performances. When we think of performing before God we might think that emphasis is being put on what we need to do before God to merit his attention, affection, and approval. Indeed, that seems to be what Simon the Pharisee is thinking. On the other hand, the sinful woman performs the act of washing Jesus’ feet not to merit Jesus’ attention, affection, and approval but rather she does so out of great love and appreciation for who Jesus is and the love that he has shown to her.

The first performer that we witnessed in our Gospel reading is Simon. He is a member of the Jewish Sect during the New Testament times known as the Pharisees. Their title derives from a word that means “set apart.” Consistent with the general teaching and practice of the Pharisees, Simon would have held to a strict observance of rites and ceremonies of the written law and he would have insisted on the validity of their own oral traditions concerning the law, known as the Mishnah. The tendency of Pharisees was to count themselves worthy and holy before God based on their ethnicity as a Jew and their strict observance to ceremonial law and oral traditions.

As we learn in our reading, Simon the Pharisee extends an invitation to Jesus for dinner in his home. The Pharisee likely heard about Jesus as a great prophet and the works that he was doing and wished to learn more about him. The Pharisee seems to be bidding for this prophet’s attention, affection, and approval.

As Jesus begins reclining at the table, the second performer comes in. The door of the Pharisees home would have likely been propped open while the guests were arriving and so this woman is able to slip into Simon’s home unnoticed and uninvited. According to the social customs of the day her presence in Pharisees home would have been most inappropriate. For, as we learn in the reading, she was categorically given the label of “sinner.” She was unclean and unwelcome to socialize, especially to eat with someone like a distinguished Pharisee. Yet, she comes uninvited and stands behind Jesus and spontaneously performs. She begins weeping at the very sight of Jesus. She uses her tears to wash his feet. Without a towel in hand to dry his feet, she disgraces herself by letting down her hair in public and in front of a male audience and uses her hair to wipe his feet. She then kneels down and continues washing his feet with her kisses and she even takes out what would have most likely been an expensive bottle of ointment to anoint the feet of Jesus. This woman responds to the very sight of Jesus with emotion and a great performance of love and service.

In New Testament times where everyone walked everywhere on dirty, dusty terrain with sandals, it would have been custom for the dinner host to provide his guests with a wash basin to wash their feet. In the fervor of Simon's attempt to "wine and dine" Jesus, this man he believed to be a great prophet, he failed to carry out a most basic courtesy. He neglected one of the most fundamental tasks of a host. The sinful woman then comes in uninvited to perform the function of the host, tending to the dirty, dusty feet of Jesus. In the presence of Jesus, Simon the host vies for his attention and approval in a self-serving way, even neglecting the basic needs of his guest. In the presence of Jesus, the uninvited, unwelcomed sinful woman responds to the love and compassion of Jesus with love, devotion, and service.

On this Father's Day it is fitting to examine these two responses to the presence of Jesus, these two "performances." We might consider our response to our tendencies as children of our Heavenly Father. Simon seems to be treating Jesus primarily as an object for personal gain rather than a person to be loved. Are there ways in which we treat other people less as people and more as objects for our pleasure, gain, and self-satisfaction? Are there times that we treat our God as an object that gives us stuff we want and blessings we think we deserve, much like a cosmic vending machine? Do we treat God, our Father as one that we can get stuff from rather than living in a healthy, loving relationship, he as our Heavenly Father and we as his children? In these ways we may lack the respect and reverence for God and neglect some of the most basic duties of spiritual hospitality. This may result in a lack of trust in our God.

Through her hospitality, the woman showed a sense of love, respect, and honor for Jesus. She treated God himself in the flesh as a person worthy of her love, devotion, and service rather than as an object to be taken advantage of for her personal gain. She had faith in Jesus and trusted in him and his word of forgiveness. She knew she had a great debt that she owed to her God. Through Jesus she believed that the debt was forgiven and paid and that truth brought her a great sense of gratitude. She was released and free and she responded to that great news with an act of love, service, and devotion.

The Apostle, St. John, can say in his first letter, "We love because God first loved us" (1 Jn 4:19). As a result of our Father's love and devotion and service for us through his firstborn Son's sacrificial performance on the cross and unprecedented rising from the tomb, we cannot help but respond in love, devotion, and service. Our relationship with God, our Father is restored and repaired through the performance of Jesus. We are at peace with God by his grace through faith. We then go forth to live in peace.

So what do we do in a time of peace? You simply live. But now through the transforming work of Jesus Christ to bring peace to your relationship with your Heavenly Father through the forgiveness of sins, all of your human relationships have the possibility to also be transformed. Now, we perform acts of love and service not to gain the attention, affection, and approval of our earthly Fathers, mothers, spouses, or children, but as a response that flows naturally from our life of faith in our Heavenly Father. The love he has shown us is lavished upon others. The peace we have with him is poured out in our family relationships. Look what he has done! Amen.