

Transforming Love

From the series: Stories Jesus Told

Luke 7:18-50

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Let me begin by reminding you of what I am attempting in these three presentations which I've titled "Stories Jesus Told." The first last month focused on the parable of the Prodigal Son which I suggested is not about the prodigality of the son but the prodigal love of the father. Today an encounter and a story about transforming love. My purpose in centering on these stories is to discover the understanding of the nature of God they reflect – using the word God as the symbol for the Sacred Mystery at the heart of reality – Sacred Mystery, Ground of Being, Creative Source/Enlivening Presence, even, I suppose, Creative Nothingness/Emptiness. The great religious traditions have variously imaged the ultimate/the absolute. My Christian faith finds its most profound understanding of the nature of God in the incarnation – the human embodiment of God in Jesus.

The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. And the one in whose face we see a clue to the mystery of God did not leave us a dogmatic text or a catechism; rather, Jesus told stories – stories whose purpose was to reflect the nature of God as Jesus understood the Divine nature and reality.

Today's lesson, I suggest, reveals God as Transforming Love. Let me be clear: I am *selective* in my use of Scripture. I take responsibility for that selection because part of my religious journey as a Christian and a minister of the Gospel has been a movement from seeing the Bible as my authority for truth, to seeing truth as my authority as I meditate on the Bible. Stated differently, my authority is truth rather than some authority being my truth.

Truth – Do I claim to possess it? No, not as ultimate, absolute truth – It is truth as I understand it, as it resonates with me, with my best wisdom and insight. This is not to deny that there is Absolute Truth; it is simply to recognize no human possesses it. There will always only be a relative grasp of that Absolute.

With that acknowledgement let me set the context for the story we consider today. In Luke 7 we have Jesus carrying on his healing ministry and he is being acclaimed by the people. Then in 7:18 John the Baptist appears in the narrative. John had led a popular religious renewal movement and is called the Baptist for

he called people to be baptized as a sign of repentance and renewal before what he believed would be the in-breaking of the Kingdom of God.

John was apocalyptic. He expected the end of the age. He was looking for God to send a messenger (Messiah – anointed one) who could usher in the end time when God would vindicate the righteous and pour out God’s wrath on the wicked. John was expecting, in the parlance of the Hebrew prophet, “that great and terrible day of the Lord.” And John couldn’t wait. It seems he had hoped Jesus was that one who was to come. But now, in prison because he had the temerity to condemn the court scandal of King Herod, he hears of the ministry of Jesus –

Good news of the in-breaking of God’s Kingdom all right, but good news and grace to all and healing – a ministry of inclusion for all people.

And John is confused and disappointed – hoping for fire and judgment, John hears of grace and healing. And so he sends his disciple to Jesus with the burning question for John:

Are you the one who is to come or do we look for another?

Oh, can’t you feel the urgency, the pathos of that question for John! His whole life project is at stake. Had he got the wrong person? Had he misunderstood the times in which he lived? Was he wrong about God’s program?

The disciples of John come to Jesus and they pose the question.

In a positive and gracious way Jesus responds. He doesn’t answer the question as such. He simply says, “Go tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them, and blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me.” The citations of the dimension of Jesus’ ministry are taken from the Hebrew prophets but those who spoke of healing, not apocalypse.

When John’s disciples left, Jesus spoke to the crowd about John. He affirmed him as a great prophet. Jesus himself had begun as part of the movement of John the Baptist but at some point he left and went on his own and he fashioned quite a different ministry. But nonetheless, he honored John as a great prophet.

Then in a parenthesis Luke tells us that the very religious authorities, the Temple establishment, that were offended at Jesus and grumbled about his inclusion of all and his refusing to follow the purity codes that determine who was in and who was out, had also rejected John’s ministry.

That brings us to the occasion for the story we examine today.

The Occasion:

A religious leader – a Pharisee named Simon – wanted to know Jesus firsthand so he could judge for himself whether this one causing such a stir was a genuine religious teacher, a prophet as claimed, or just another messianic pretender of which there were plenty – another charismatic religious figure who would flame up and soon burn out. And so he invited Jesus to a dinner party. We need not attribute sinister motives to Simon. Let's assume it was an honest effort to judge Jesus for himself.

And there it happened.

Unlike our dinner parties in the privacy of our homes, the Middle Eastern home had an open courtyard where folks could wander in and then it wasn't that unusual for some even to sit along the wall of the inner home and listen to the conversation. On this occasion a woman of the street or lady of the night entered. Seeing Jesus whom she must have seen before – a time when somehow he gave her dignity and humanity – she lost it – emotion burst forth. She intended to give him a sign of love and respect for she brought a flask of ointment. What she did instead was the bursting forth of emotion – tears falling on his feet – letting down her hair never done in public by respectable women but an action she had mastered. She wipes his feet with her hair and anointed them with the ointment. Such a display of love and emotion was precisely what never happened at the house of a Pharisee.

It was all quite embarrassing and disconcerting for Simon, the host, but at least he accomplished the purpose of the dinner engagement – he knew now that Jesus was indeed no prophet, for a prophet would have known what sort of woman this was fondling his feet – a sinner with whom the righteous would have nothing to do.

And it was just at that point that Jesus spoke saying he was indeed a prophet able to read the musing of the other's mind – and this brings us to the story.

The Story:

And Jesus answered and said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you."

And he said, "Teacher, say it."

"There was a certain creditor who had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. And when they had nothing with which to repay, he freely forgave them both. Tell me, therefore, which of them will love him more?"

Simon answered and said, "I suppose the one whom he forgave more."

And He said to him, "You have rightly judged."

Then He turned to the woman and said to Simon, “Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has washed my feet with her tears and wiped them with the hair of her head. You gave me no kiss, but this woman has not ceased to kiss my feet since the time I came in. You did not anoint my head with oil, but this woman has anointed my feet with fragrant oil.

Therefore I say to you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much. But to whom little is forgiven, the same loves little.”

And He said to her, “Your sins are forgiven.”

And those who sat at the table with Him began to say to themselves, “Who is this who even forgives sins?”

Then He said to the woman, “Your faith has saved you. Go in peace.”
(Luke 7:40f

The Teaching:

I like the King James version in this instance because I want to use the characterization of the two debtors – both having “nothing to pay” – and turn it around from the human obligation before God to the requirement of God – which is “nothing to pay.”

In the context and story what we have is the contrast between:

1. Jesus/John – A Kingdom of Grace/ A Kingdom of Judgment:
John’s threat and appeal, but Jesus’ reflecting a gracious God who says you have nothing to pay;
2. The religious institution with its delineation of who is in and who is out, its exclusionary justice dividing the righteous and the unrighteous–
and –
Jesus whose attitude, spirit and behavior was open to all conveying grace to all who, self-aware, knew they needed forgiveness and acceptance and allowed themselves to be embraced by grace.

Aware of need, receiving forgiveness and acceptance, the response is transformation and the image of God in the story is of a God whose love transforms.

Love changes a person –
Law may control;
Fear can cripple;
Power coerce;

but Love transforms.

Application:

If, as I believe, the Christian tradition sees Jesus as the human mirror of the nature of God then that mirror reflects a God who says you have nothing to pay – all your religious duties, obligations and demands are baggage placed on the single truth that you are loved for no other reason than that it is my nature to love and, when you get it, you will be transformed and love in response.

Overwhelmed by grace
the dam of emotion breaks
and love pours out
in light of such love
that transforms,
that changes and frees.

Finally let me come back to the issue I raised in the first presentation. This, I believe, is a faithful rendering of the nature of God as imaged in the stories Jesus told and indeed in his whole behavior to the end.

But is this also the nature of reality? If God is the Ground of Being, the Eternal Creative Source of All, is Love at the center? Does the God Jesus mirrors match the Creative Source of Cosmic Reality?

Let me suggest that the cosmic drama of 13.7 billion years has eventuated in the likes of us – self-conscious beings able to ask such a question and if we can wonder about such a question are we not also the very means by which the cosmic process, the human story, can be shaped? Has not the cosmic drama come into our hands? Do we not face a choice as to what future will emerge?

Look at our world – in the grip of imperial designs as we seek dominance globally, accomplished by military might and intimidation.

We may have enough power at present to keep the lid on, enforce our will, put down all resistance but seething beneath the surface is violence and anger that at any time can explode and bring apocalypse.

Maybe Jesus was just a dreamer, a visionary, impractical when it comes to the affairs of nations. But look at the chaos we have created. What if one should arise to lead who would give love a chance – because only love transforms. It works one to one, why not people to people? Could we be on the way to a future shaped by love and grace that alone can transform the human family and create a global community of justice and peace?