

Reckless Gratitude

November 19, 2017

Luke 7:36-50, James 2:14-17

The First U.P. Church of Crafton Heights

Pastor Dave Carver

To hear this sermon as preached in worship, please visit

https://castyournet.files.wordpress.com/2017/11/sermon11-19_2017-11-19_11-30-31_t001_in1.mp3

Sometime near the end of January each year, the President of the United States stands before the members of the Senate and House of Representatives and delivers the “State of the Union” address. This speech fulfills the mandate of Article II, Section 3 of the US Constitution, and it gives the President a chance to make lay out his (or, presumably someday, her) legislative agenda for the upcoming year.

If you’ve ever watched the State of the Union, you’ll note that no matter who is President, there’s one thing that always happens: the President crowds the balcony with specific individuals who will help tell the President’s story. When the President talks about the need for a defense budget, he’ll point up to a war hero or perhaps the child of a fallen soldier; when it comes to the economy, the President will mention the business tycoon, and so on. And as the crowd is assembling, the press will all take note of the people in the balcony and try to answer the questions, “Who is he?” or “What is she doing here?”



¹What is SHE doing here? That had to be a question on the minds of a lot of folks the day that Simon hosted Jesus for lunch. The up-and-coming young religious teacher had just preached a whale of a sermon and now he’s been asked to dinner at the home of one of the town’s leading citizens. As the wine is being poured, people can’t help but notice who is standing there by Jesus’ feet. I mean, we all know who she is... she’s a woman with a reputation.

¹ *Christ in the House of Simon the Pharisee*, Philippe de Champaigne, c.1656

It's awkward, to be sure, but maybe we can just photoshop her out of the pictures of the event. I mean, it's a little embarrassing, but, hey, Jesus is from out of town. Maybe *he* doesn't know who she is or what she's done...

How did she get in? Well, that's a silly question, really. It's her business to be discreet, after all. She knows who to ask, which doors to try... Face it – she's been around. And there she is, large as life, right by Jesus' feet.

Yeah, but what is she DOING there?

Omigosh – she's weeping. I mean, she is just bawling her eyes out. She's fallen down at his feet and between her tears and her hands, she's just about wiped his feet clean.

And now she's letting her hair down – a gesture of humility and vulnerability – it may even be considered a scandal in some parts of the ancient Near East – but she is letting that hair down and mopping up her tears with it. And now she's broken that alabaster jar and the whole place smells like, well, like *her*. She's smearing that ointment – the most expensive thing she owns, in all likelihood – all over Jesus' feet.

The folks who are there just can't believe it. For most of them, it's like a train wreck. They realize that they should at least pretend not to notice what's going on, but they just can't take their eyes away.

Finally, Simon, the host, has had enough. He shifts uncomfortably in his seat and he clears his throat. He's all but shouting, "Why is Jesus putting me in this situation? Come on, Jesus, you're embarrassing me. You're embarrassing *yourself*."

Seeing that all the eyes in the room are on him, waiting for him to defend himself, Jesus tells a story illustrating how a great forgiveness leads to a great love. Jesus then points to the woman – and Simon must be thinking, "Ah, finally. *Now* we're getting somewhere!". Jesus says, "Do you see her?" And

everyone in the room mouths, “Do I see her? Come on, Jesus, who can take their eyes off of her?”



²And then Jesus goes on to narrate how she has done everything that his host has failed to do. It’s a bit of a stretch, perhaps, for Jesus to assign meaning to her actions, but they’ve all seen *what* she has done. Now, Jesus tells them *why* she has done these things: “Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—as her great love has shown.” The word that Jesus uses there is important. *Apheōntai* - the word is in what we call the perfect tense. That is to say, “her sins have been forgiven” – there is an ongoing result (she has great love) as a result of a completed action (her sin has been forgiven).

I would suggest that Jesus’ use of the perfect tense indicates that her sin had been forgiven before she ever showed up at the party – she was not coming to the dinner in order to beg for forgiveness, or to somehow insinuate herself into the Divine grace; rather, she was there to publicly express her gratitude for that which Jesus had already done.

Think about that for a moment. Every eye in the room – every respectable, church-going, holier-than-thou eye in the room, had seen her come in and act so shamelessly – so recklessly. And why was she there? Because she was grateful. She was overcome with Thanksgiving.

And Jesus, quicker than anyone, points out a contrast between this woman and his host. And there are so many contrasts, indeed.

Simon is a collector... he wants to be seen with Jesus, he wants to collect favors from those he’s invited to be present, and so on. And the woman is emptying out – her eyes, her heart, her bottle of perfume.

² The Anointing of Christ, Julia Stankova (2009)

Simon is a man of words. He offers a narrative, first to himself, and then to invite Jesus. On the other hand, the one who has experienced such great forgiveness doesn't say a single thing.

Simon is reclining, almost frozen by his horror of his dinner being interrupted by this... this... *woman* – afraid of what people might say and how it might reflect on him. The woman, however, is in motion nonstop as she caresses his feet first with her tears and hands and then with her hair and later with the ointment.

He has a name and a title: Simon the Pharisee. She has nothing but her shame and anonymity.

He is working hard to design a future for himself wherein everyone recognizes him for his holiness and sincerity. She is coming out of a past which she knows to be bankrupt.

And, of course, the fundamental difference for our purposes this morning is that this unnamed, silent, scorned woman is behaving in a way that speaks volumes about the fact that she is deeply and profoundly grateful, while the host of the meal puffs himself out and hopes that everyone notices the quality of the spread that he's pulled together for this crowd.

Our theme for the month is gratitude, and today I would like to consider ways in which gratitude can be a motivating factor in our lives. It's easy to see here, for instance, that this woman was so overcome with the realization of what Jesus had done in her life that she was driven to give her all to him, no matter what. Because he had given himself so completely to her, she was able to respond with little regard to the scorn or the raised eyebrows of anyone else in the room.

And, what do you know, this week is Thanksgiving here in the United States. What role does gratitude play in your life? Are you thankful?

Oh, you bet I am, Pastor. In fact, on Thanksgiving Day, at

our home, we go around the table and all take turns before we eat saying one thing for which we're thankful...

You know I'm grateful! One of the time-honored ways we celebrate being grateful in our home is by getting up before the crack of dawn on the day after Thanksgiving so that we can go out and buy more stuff, cheap. It's my favorite holiday...

Yeah, well, that's not really the kind of thankfulness I'm going for here. Are you aware of what you've received, what's been done on your behalf, where you stand in the world, and the scope of blessing that surrounds you?

Are you grateful?

For what?

Who knows that you are grateful?

How do they know?

Is your gratitude leaking out into the rest of your life? Would you, and would others, say that it is apparent?

I am reminded of the time when a guest speaker – a local business leader - stood in front of the congregation to talk about living a life of gratitude after hearing this scripture reading. He was a millionaire many times over, but he talked about how his life had been shaped by an event in that church many years previous. A missionary had stood up and read the story from Luke and challenged the people to follow the example of the woman at the feast and give all that they were and all that they had to the Lord. Then, it was time for the offering.

The plate came to the young man and he realized that he had only a single dollar in his wallet. "I knew right then that I was at a crossroads," the man said. "It was all or nothing. I was either going to give everything I had to the Lord, or nothing at all. Well, I gave the dollar - everything I owned - to God, and God blessed that decision, and I'm sure that's why I am where I am today."

Well, as you can imagine, there was a hush in the room. The crowd looked at him with admiration as this millionaire made his way back to his seat. And right before the next hymn started, one little old lady leaned over to him and whispered just loudly enough for the entire congregation to hear, "I dare you to do it again."³

That's reckless gratitude, isn't it? Giving *everything* to God? What would that even look like?

A couple of weeks ago I dared you all to start an experiment. I asked you to write one thank-you note each day. My hope was that you would stop your working and playing and acquiring and fussing and complaining and serving and the hundred ways that you "should" on yourself each day to simply be mindful of the fact that you have received many blessings – some large, some small. My hope was that we could put a pause on all of our doing and concentrate on being for a few moments each day.

I'm not going to ask who has taken me up on that challenge because I'm not sure I'm prepared to handle that level of disappointment on a Sunday morning. But I will remind you that even though I issued the challenge two weeks ago, there's no reason why you can't start today.

Listen: in the past two weeks I've buried two thirty-three year olds. Thirty-three year olds! We huddled holding cups of coffee saying things like, "I remember when she was so small" or "what's his son going to do now?" We talked about life and vitality and energy and walked away, sighing, "Well, you never know..."

And me? For crying out loud, old fossil that I am, I'm still here. Today, I didn't wake up dead. Neither did you. We got one more day!

Why? What are you going to do with it? What will you do with the life you've been given, regardless of the number of days?



The reason I wanted to ask you to write those thank you notes – *before* Ben and Anya died – is because I think that if we do it right, our entire lives are supposed to *be* thank you notes.

One of the kindest and most generous people that God ever put on this earth is a young lady who sits in the back of this room most Sundays and works the computer during worship. I have the privilege of getting to hang out with her every now and then, and here's something you might not know about her: my wife has little stickers on her phone, in her computer, and taped to the inside of our medicine cabinet at home – and they all say something like, “Be a blessing” (sorry, honey, if that means you've got to change your passwords now...). She has modeled for me – for decades – the practice of thanks-living.

You will never be able to give anything meaningfully until you figure out how to be grateful for what you've received. My hope and prayer for each of us this day is that each one of us might rise from the benediction determined to be a blessing in the world around us as our lives become shaped by reckless gratitude. Thanks be to God! Amen.