

Brothers and Sisters Grace and Peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ...Amen. A good friend and mentor of mine was once telling me a story of an interesting experience he had at his first call. You see, he was serving an inner-city congregation in Milwaukee, WI as a solo pastor and it was one of those old buildings that was really kept up well over the years but like many inner-city congregations, membership was on a decline due to people moving out to more affordable housing in the suburban areas of the city. Well, one morning as he was giving his sermon, all of a sudden he heard some one from the congregation shout "Alleluia, Brother". Now this had my friend shocked and a bit taken aback by this. Of course, he could also sense that the people in the congregation were a bit put off by this, but not wanting to make a big out of it, like any good Lutheran, he just kept on preaching. Well, as he went on, all of sudden he heard that same voice shout out, "Amen, Preach It Brother." Again taken he was aback by this, but this time my friend kind of paused, looked at this person, smiled and said..."Thank You, I will do my best to preach it". And as he continued with his sermon, there were a few more Amen's, Alleluia's, and Praise the Lord's thrown in there at various points.

Now, after the service my friend wanted to seek out this individual who he knew was a visitor so he could get to know this person. When he spotted him in the Narthex, he saw that some of the members of the congregation already talking with him. Now as he got closer and began to hear what was being said, he found out that these members weren't necessarily talking with him...but were actually lecturing him and telling this person, in essence, that "We know you're new here, but you should know, we don't do that kind of stuff here". And before my friend got a chance to talk with the man, he simply nodded to those speaking to him, turned and walked out the door.

A few weeks went by and that man was not seen in church again. But the story does not end there...about a month after this man had visited this church, my friend was out doing some hospital visits. He was going to the cancer treatment center to visit some folks and as he was walking out of one of the rooms where a member was staying, he saw that same man who was shouting those words of praise, sitting in there in the waiting room and so he decided to finally have that chat with him that he wasn't able to have a few weeks ago. As they got to talking, my friend found out that a few days prior to this man showing up at church that morning, he had found out that his wife was diagnosed with terminal cancer. And, after staying by her side for a few days, his mother and father in-law had told him to get out of the house and get some fresh air and that they would watch after her. Well the man had been out driving around on a Sunday morning and had seen the sign out front saying that all were welcome and it was a few minutes before worship was to start so he went in because he needed to hear that good news, that Gospel message, that message of hope in his own time of despair.

Hearing this then, my friend's curiosity took over and he inquired whether this man had been raised in a Baptist or Pentecostal tradition where expressing one's self during a sermon is a norm. To my friends surprise, this man said that he had actually been born and raised Presbyterian and, up until recently, had been active in a congregation. Of course, hearing this now my friend's curiosity led him to his next question which was...why then during my sermon did you shout those things out. The man looked at my friend and said, "Well, I was at a point where I could not get any lower than I am now and hearing those word's of hope you spoke as you quoted and talked about the bible, really just got to me and for whatever reason I just felt like expressing how I felt." He went on to say that he was sorry and that he did not mean to offend anybody. Well, after offering this man reassurance that he was not in trouble or hated by anyone in the congregation; my friend decided to invite this person back that Sunday and asked him to read the Gospel text for him. Well, the man, not wanting to cause trouble, respectfully declined. But the Pastor said that if he ever needed to talk, to give him a call. And they continue to keep in touch to this day

In our Gospel for today, we find that Jesus is sitting with a group of Pharisee's and sharing a meal with them. Now, as they are seated there and eating their meal, a woman comes in and goes right to Jesus. She is standing there weeping and before you know it she is lying down at his feet, bathing them with her tears, and then wipes them up with her hair. And then, she starts to kiss feet and starts to anoint them with ointment. Now, this was not considered normal meal time behavior even back in Jesus time and as we see in the story, the others present felt the same way.

In fact, as we find out from our Gospel reading today, not only are they a bit uncomfortable with her behavior, but if Jesus is, who everyone says he is, then he should know that this woman is a sinner and that Jesus should not even allow her to touch him. And Jesus' reaction, well, he tells them a parable and points out that this woman, who's sins are many, are to be forgiven and then he looks at the woman and confirms this by saying "Your sins are forgiven."

You see, this woman knew she was a sinner, she knew that her sins were many and where is she driven...to the feet of Jesus. And in her reaction, you get this sense that all of the sin in her life had really been dragging her down to the point where she was drowning in it. And then she hears of the one who is to take the sin away from the world, the one who is to give hope to all humankind and what does she do...she throws herself at Jesus feet, her tears flowing to the point where she feels the need to wipe them up with her hair and then anoint Jesus' feet with ointment. All the time, you get the sense that she really does not care what is going on around her. She does not care that she is interrupting this meal or disturbing their conversation; she does not care that she was uninvited or was not part of the "in crowd there". And how does Jesus react, does he rebuke her for interrupting his dinner conversation, for disturbing the ambiance...NO, he welcomes her and proclaims that her sins are forgiven.

What this story is telling us then is that as we are confronted with our own Sin, much like David was in our reading from 2 Samuel, and then we hear this word of forgiveness, this word of unconditional love through Christ's death and resurrection, this Gospel word, our responses are not always clean, conventional and convenient. When we are at a point where the Gospel is proclaimed to us in a way that meets us where we are at in life, the Holy Spirit, can point us towards Christ in ways that aren't always neat and tidy and orderly. Just like that man I mentioned earlier, sometimes that Gospel news, the news of Jesus Christ's continual presence in our lives today can lead us to respond in ways that can be unpredictable. Yet, as Jesus reminds us through his actions today, those responses are all welcome.

You see, amongst God's creation each and every one of us is unique and how we respond to this grace is unique unto itself and as long as it keeps pointing us in the direction of Christ, who are we to Judge it. We can't predict it, it just happens. Think of all those stories we hear of people passing up good paying jobs to go do mission work in the inner cities or in other countries. Or those times we hear of people giving up a Saturday afternoon to go and help out at a Habitat for Humanity site or a local food shelf instead of sitting at home to catch the big game. Or better yet, those times when we are in such a rush to get somewhere and all of a sudden we see someone who needs a door opened for them, or help with their groceries and we stop to help them whether we know them or not even though the convenient thing to do would be to just keep on our merry way. Or when someone, who has just heard that his wife is diagnosed with terminal cancer hears a Gospel words and shouts out Alleluia or Praise Jesus despite what others may think.

Regardless of the examples out there, the reality is that all around us we are seeing ways in which we respond to the Gospel that aren't planned, or convenient, or that fit the status quo. But, just as the lady who threw herself at the feet of Jesus today did, so to are we called to respond to the Gospel. And those responses will not always be clean, orderly, or planned out 6 months ahead of time. Sometimes, as the spirit moves us, they will happen. But thank God that Jesus Christ, who died for you, whose blood sets us free to be people of God, is constantly there beside us. Just as he spoke those words of forgiveness to the woman at the well, so to does he speak those words of forgiveness to us today no matter how we respond...Amen.