

11TH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR - C
“She loved much...”

At long last, we are back in Ordinary Time. It's been since the end of February that we've been here. Take the 40 days of Lent, then add the 50 days of Easter and the Feasts of Pentecost, the Trinity and the Eucharist, and it's been something like 115 days! I like Ordinary Time. And this year it coincides with the beginning of summer. That makes it even sound better; a time to relax a bit. So we return to St. Luke's account of the gospel. I like this because St. Luke is such a good storyteller. Luke gave us the wonderful story of the Prodigal Son. Who doesn't like a good story? And today's is a gem.

Jesus is invited to dine with Simon, a Pharisee, wanting to know Jesus better. And no sooner do they begin to eat that an uninvited woman crashes the dinner. She looks like a woman of the street. Everyone must have stopped in mid-bite and gasped to themselves, *“Good grief! What's she doing here?”* The woman seems to know exactly why she is there and proceeds immediately to where Jesus is reclining at the table. Standing behind him, she begins what could only have been seen as scandalous behavior. She bathed Jesus' feet with her tears and then dried them with her hair. The problem is that in that culture, no one ever touched another person's feet in public and no decent woman ever let her hair hang loose in public. She was a woman of the street. She was a prostitute. And then, as if what she had done wasn't enough, she proceeds to kiss Jesus' feet and anoint them with oil.

Simon wanted to know Jesus better, but what he was learning about Jesus was as scandalous as the woman's behavior. How could he ever allow such a person to do such things? Since no one of honor would ever allow it, he concluded that Jesus must be a fraud.

Everyone is uncomfortable but Jesus and the woman. He could have told her to stop, and she would have immediately. But he didn't. You see, Jesus wasn't looking at her behavior, but her love. Rather than scandalous acts, to Jesus the washing, the drying, the kissing, the anointing were all acts of devotion, adoration and thanksgiving. How could he stop her? In fact, by the little riddle about who loves most, the one who is forgiven a little debt or a big debt, Jesus actually gets Simon to question if he was such a good host himself. After all, the woman did the very things a good host would have done.

But Jesus isn't trying to put down Simon. He wants him to see that what really matters is the love we have in our hearts toward the people in our lives. And that love is what leads to forgiveness, regardless of the kind and number of sins one has committed. Jesus wants Simon to see that he and everyone at the dinner had misjudged the woman because they only looked at her external behavior, ignoring that what was going on was actually something beautiful, wholesome and healing. If we hold a sin against a person regardless of their change of heart, it betrays our seeing only externals, and not the love of a repentant heart. Not only is Jesus telling us to be careful of our readiness to judge others by external appearances, he is also inviting us to seek out the loving mercy of God for ourselves when we have sinned. The woman didn't care what anyone thought about her. She knew that Jesus would love her anyway, and free her to live life again.

By the way, I often meet people who feel alone and unloved, and often they are carrying a burden of some past sin. If only they would let Jesus love them by seeking his forgiveness, they could be free to live again, too. We must let Jesus love us!

This story of the woman who loved much is a great story. But it raises some problems for us today that didn't exist in Jesus' time. Say that

we allow someone into ministry whom we know to have a history of taking advantage of people financially, sexually or whatever. While we forgive their sin, we also run the risk of being sued should they ever act out again. Because of our litigious society, people are lying in wait for us to make a mistake so they can sue us. That's just a fact. The reason the church is paying out millions of dollars to abuse victims is because people have judged we should have known better. So we have to be careful.

The archdiocese is doing all it can to protect innocent people from anyone who could take advantage of them in any way. Not only must background checks be taken on all employees in our parish, they must also attend a safe environment seminar. All volunteers who minister on a one-on-one basis with children, teens and/or adults must do the same. If a background check comes back with a red flag, as it were, we must not allow that person into a ministry where he/she can have access to others. We can't. This is not a violation of that person's individual rights, as ministry on behalf of our parish is not a right. It is a privilege. Anyone who ministers as a representative of our parish in any way does so at the approval of the pastor. While they are welcome to worship here, they cannot represent our parish in ministry. We cannot put ourselves in a position where we can be held responsible for their behavior. Should they be convicted sex offenders, they can come to Mass, but only if they are with a monitor who knows the situation. When that is what the law requires, we follow it.

Unfortunately, this is the world in which we live. I don't like it. The danger is that in protecting ourselves from legal action we could compromise the gospel of Jesus. We are not dispensed, any of us, from the command to love the people in our lives, all of them. May the Eucharist we celebrate continue the transformation of our hearts.

