

SERMON FOR SUNDAY, JUNE 13, 2010

Eleventh Sunday in Ordinary Time

Scriptures: Psalm 5; Galatians 2:15-21; 1 Kings 21:1-21; Luke 7:36-8:3

LOVE AND JUSTICE

I have found justice to be a sometimes illusive thing. I have witnessed so many times where the innocent have suffered while the guilty get away scot-free. I have seen a woman who divorced her husband because he abused her physically and emotionally be abused even further by the system which should have helped her. The husband was able to hire a good lawyer, she was not. He was able to find all kinds of loop holes which postponed or eliminated his responsibility for paying money due his ex-wife. Court dates were changed at the last minute, even though the woman had to take time off from her job causing problems with her boss. Over and over again it seemed that the man got off the hook for what he owed his family, while over and over again the wife suffered more abuse.

A few days ago, I saw a headline in one of the supermarket tabloids. You know the kind of headline which tells you that a prominent political figure is carrying the child of a little green man from the planet Mars. The headline I saw this week was this: **Finally, Justice for Natalie Holloway.** Now, I ask you, how can that poor young woman who was murdered in Aruba receive justice? Isn't the right to live your life the first requirement for justice?

Yet, I do understand that when we speak of justice we are many times referring to the punishment for wrongdoing. We have expressions like, "She got what she deserved." or "He got his just desserts." We have a human desire to see punishment which is equal to the crime or sin committed. There's an old story about a preacher speaking to a children's Sunday school class. He asked the question, "What must one do to be forgiven of sin?" One of the kids answered, "First of all, you have to sin." I

think most of us would agree that we don't have to set out to sin, we just seem to get messed up with it without any trouble at all. And after we sin, Jesus has promised that we will be forgiven of our sin.

So, I have to ask the question this morning: If punishment for sin is justice, what is forgiveness of sin? Is it justice too? The dictionary says this about the word "just:" *Honorable and fair in one's dealings and actions: a just ruler. Consistent with what is morally right; righteous: a just cause.* Is it fair and right to be forgiven for taking a life, or for stealing money from hundreds of people's retirement accounts? Is it fair and righteous for a thief, an adulterer, a blasphemer to be forgiven and never punished? These are each an example of the breaking of one of the Ten Commandments. God says we are not to steal, commit adultery, or misuse the name of the Lord as a swear word. These are not laws which are up for discussion. We are **Not** to break these laws nor the other seven of the Ten Commandments.

But God is just, always right. God cannot do wrong. God is holy. It is impossible for us to make ourselves worthy of being in God's presence, yet that is what we want. We want to be presentable to God, and we even dare to hope that one day we will have eternal life with God. The problem comes in the fact that we are in truth sinners, even though people use other words for the condition because they don't like the word sin. Karl Menninger years ago wrote a book called, *Whatever Happened to Sin?* "The famed psychiatrist, said that if he could convince the patients in psychiatric hospitals that their sins were forgiven, 75 percent of them could walk out the next day!" If we are truthful with ourselves, we really don't want justice from God, because justice would mean receiving the punishment we deserve. That's where love comes in doesn't it? God's love for the world was so great, the Bible says, that "he gave his one and only Son that whosoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting [or eternal] life."

The Old and New Testament lessons for this day are examples of the extremes to which sin can go. The book of 1 Kings gives us the story of two of the most despicable people who ever lived— King Ahab and his wife Jezebel. Their lives, including their interaction with the prophet Elijah, actually takes place over several chapters of the books of First and Second Kings. The manner of their deaths was foretold by the prophets. Ahab was hit by an arrow during battle, he bled out in his chariot, and his blood was licked up by the dogs. Jezebel, wearing the elaborate make-up worn for the worshiping of her idol Baal, was thrown from a tower, her body smashed to pieces and devoured by dogs. Just punishment for their many acts of evil.

How different is the New Testament story, and how beautiful the ending. Jesus is dining with friends, and they are reclining at the table which means the guests are on couches with their heads near the food and their feet extending out into the room. The woman who came into that room did not have to crawl under a table or make a big show of herself. She came up behind Jesus and stood by his feet. Two points I would make. First, this is one of two different accounts of a woman anointing Jesus. In this account, we are told that the woman is known in the town as a person who lived a sinful life. We can only imagine what that might mean, she is, however, condemned by the others. The second point is that this dinner takes place at the home of a Pharisee, and the Pharisees were very big on knowing and keeping the Law. They were also good at seeing the speck in their neighbor's eye, while having a log sticking out of their own eyes.

The woman stands at Jesus' feet, and it seems that just being in his presence causes her to become filled with guilt and sorry for her sins. There is something about Jesus that gets to her. She begins to cry and her tears are so many that they reach the feet of Jesus. She then begins to wipe the tears away with her hair which she has let down for the purpose, and she pours perfume from an alabaster jar over his feet

and she kisses them. And she is a sinner!

According to Dr. Alan Culpepper: “The woman's act expresses love and gratitude, but it also violated social conventions. Touching or caressing a man's feet could have sexual overtones, as did letting down her hair, so a woman never let down her hair in public. Moreover, the woman was known to be a sinner. Assuming she was unclean, she would have made Jesus unclean by touching him.”

One of the Pharisees questions in his own mind whether Jesus understands the implications of what has happened. Notice what is said in verse 39 of Luke chapter seven: “When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, “If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is—that she is a sinner.”” **He says to himself!** And in the next verse we are told that Jesus answered him. You see, we are known by God and nothing can be hidden from God. Jesus said that he had something to tell the man called Simon. Wisely, Simon replied, “Tell me, teacher.” When Jesus has something to say to you, the best thing you can ever do is to say, “Tell me what it is.” It may be that he will tell you something hard to bear, but it will be for your own good. That was the case that night in the at the dinner party in the house of the Pharisee.

Jesus asked the man a rhetorical question. He said, two men owed money to a money lender, one of them owed 500 denarii and the other owed fifty denarii. Neither one of them could pay the money lender back, so he canceled their debts. Jesus asked, “Now which of them will love him more?” And Simon replied, “I suppose the one who had the bigger debt canceled.” Jesus commended him for his answer and said he was correct.

Then, Jesus turned to the woman and said, “**Do you see this woman?**” Jesus

is well aware that Simon has seen her, otherwise this whole conversation would not be taking place. But Jesus wants the man to really see and to understand what was happening right before his eyes. He wants there to be an understanding that though the woman's sins are many, he will forgive her. And Jesus predicts that her love for him will be great because of the enormity of what he will do for her. Jesus came into the world to save the lost, to save sinners like the woman in the story, like you and like me. The Bible says, "I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent."

Charles Haddon Spurgeon was a well-known fiery British preacher and prolific writer of the nineteenth century who preached an average of ten sermons a week. In his sermon titled "A Just God" he wrote this.

"Do not attempt to touch yourself up and make yourself something other than you really are; but come as you are to Him who justifies the ungodly. A great artist some short time ago had painted a part of the corporation of the city in which he lived, and he wanted, for historic purposes, to include in his picture certain characters well known in the town. A crossing-sweeper, unkempt, ragged, filthy, was known to everybody, and there was a suitable place for him in the picture. The artist said to this ragged and rugged individual, "I will pay you well if you will come down to my studio and let me take your likeness." He came round in the morning, but he was soon sent about his business; for he had washed his face, and combed his hair, and donned a respectable suit of clothes. He was needed as a beggar, and was not invited in any other capacity. Even so, the gospel will receive you into its halls if you come as a sinner, not otherwise. Wait not for reformation, but come at once for salvation. God justifieth the ungodly, and that takes you up where you now are: it meets you in your worst estate. Come in your deshabelle [disorder]. I mean, come to your heavenly Father in all your sin and sinfulness. Come to Jesus just as you are, leprous, filthy,

naked, neither fit to live nor fit to die.Come, though despair is brooding over you, pressing upon your bosom like a horrible nightmare.”

The words are bit flowery and old-fashioned for our taste and time, but the they are so true. The woman who washed Jesus’ feet with her tears could have stayed away, she could have tried to get her life cleaned up so that she was worthy of Jesus. But she knew that she was way beyond helping herself, way beyond cleaning up the mess she had made of her life. She had only one thing left to her. She had heard of a man who went about doing good, teaching about God and healing the sick. And she knew in her heart that she was as sick as the lepers whom Jesus touched with his hand of love and healing. Her sickness was the burden of past sin.

Jesus asked Simon the Pharisee, “Do you see this woman?” He wanted Simon to really understand what he saw. He wanted Simon to understand what was about to happen. A woman who everyone acknowledged to be a terrible sinner– even the woman herself knew it– that woman was going to experience the love and justice of God. Jesus said to her, “Your sins are forgiven.” Right then she became a new person, clean and new again. The line of the hymn comes to mind, “Amazing grace how sweet the sound which saved a wretch like me.” That tearful, guilt-ridden woman and you and I, all of us are like the wretch of the hymn. We need the grace of Jesus, the grace of forgiveness and acceptance into the kingdom of God. All we have to do is come to him and ask.

The last words Jesus spoke to the woman were, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.” Go in peace, those lovely words of benediction. And yet, where do you go after being forgiven by Jesus, in real life where do you go? Fred Craddock writes this:

“Where does one go when told by Christ "Go in peace"? The price of the

woman's way of life in the city has been removal from the very institutions that carried the resources to restore her. The one place where she is welcome is the street, among people like herself. What she needs is a community of forgiven and forgiving sinners. The story screams the need for a church, not just any church but one that says, "You are welcome here."

Friends, we can be that church, the community of forgiven and forgiving sinners. We can be the church that understands about God's love and justice because we've experienced it first hand. We can be the church which always says, "You are welcome here. In the name of Jesus Christ, you are welcome here."

Naboth's Vineyard

1 Some time later there was an incident involving a vineyard belonging to Naboth the Jezreelite. The vineyard was in Jezreel, close to the palace of Ahab king of Samaria. 2 Ahab said to Naboth, "Let me have your vineyard to use for a vegetable garden, since it is close to my palace. In exchange I will give you a better vineyard or, if you prefer, I will pay you whatever it is worth."

3 But Naboth replied, "The LORD forbid that I should give you the inheritance of my fathers."

4 So Ahab went home, sullen and angry because Naboth the Jezreelite had said, "I will not give you the inheritance of my fathers." He lay on his bed sulking and refused to eat.

5 His wife Jezebel came in and asked him, "Why are you so sullen? Why won't you eat?"

6 He answered her, "Because I said to Naboth the Jezreelite, 'Sell me your vineyard; or if you prefer, I will give you another vineyard in its place.' But he said, 'I will not give you my vineyard.' "

7 Jezebel his wife said, "Is this how you act as king over Israel? Get up and eat! Cheer up. I'll get you the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite."

8 So she wrote letters in Ahab's name, placed his seal on them, and sent them to the elders and nobles who lived in Naboth's city with him. 9 In those letters she wrote:

"Proclaim a day of fasting and seat Naboth in a prominent place among the people. 10 But seat two scoundrels opposite him and have them testify that he has

cursed both God and the king. Then take him out and stone him to death."

11 So the elders and nobles who lived in Naboth's city did as Jezebel directed in the letters she had written to them. 12 They proclaimed a fast and seated Naboth in a prominent place among the people. 13 Then two scoundrels came and sat opposite him and brought charges against Naboth before the people, saying, "Naboth has cursed both God and the king." So they took him outside the city and stoned him to death. 14 Then they sent word to Jezebel: "Naboth has been stoned and is dead."

15 As soon as Jezebel heard that Naboth had been stoned to death, she said to Ahab, "Get up and take possession of the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite that he refused to sell you. He is no longer alive, but dead." 16 When Ahab heard that Naboth was dead, he got up and went down to take possession of Naboth's vineyard.

17 Then the word of the LORD came to Elijah the Tishbite: 18 "Go down to meet Ahab king of Israel, who rules in Samaria. He is now in Naboth's vineyard, where he has gone to take possession of it. 19 Say to him, 'This is what the LORD says: Have you not murdered a man and seized his property?' Then say to him, 'This is what the LORD says: In the place where dogs licked up Naboth's blood, dogs will lick up your blood—yes, yours!' "

20 Ahab said to Elijah, "So you have found me, my enemy!"

"I have found you," he answered, "because you have sold yourself to do evil in the eyes of the LORD. 21 'I am going to bring disaster on you. I will consume your descendants and cut off from Ahab every last male in Israel—slave or free.

Luke 7:36-8:3 (New International Version)

Jesus Anointed by a Sinful Woman

36Now one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him, so he went to the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table. 37When a woman who had lived a sinful life in that town learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's house, she brought an alabaster jar of perfume, 38and as she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them.

39When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is—that she is a sinner."

40Jesus answered him, "Simon, I have something to tell you."

"Tell me, teacher," he said.

41"Two men owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii,[a] and the other fifty. 42Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he canceled the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?"

43Simon replied, "I suppose the one who had the bigger debt canceled."

"You have judged correctly," Jesus said.

44Then he turned toward the woman and said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. 45You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. 46You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet. 47Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—for she loved much. But he who has been forgiven little

loves little."

48Then Jesus said to her, "Your sins are forgiven."

49The other guests began to say among themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?"

50Jesus said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

Galatians 2:15-21 (New International Version)

15"We who are Jews by birth and not 'Gentile sinners' 16know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified.

17"If, while we seek to be justified in Christ, it becomes evident that we ourselves are sinners, does that mean that Christ promotes sin? Absolutely not! 18If I rebuild what I destroyed, I prove that I am a lawbreaker. 19For through the law I died to the law so that I might live for God. 20I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. 21I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!"[a]