

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt
Glenshaw Presbyterian Church
11th Sunday in Ordinary Time
June 13, 2010

A Religious Role Model

Galatians 1:11-24; Luke 7:36-50

You may have heard the story about the religious experts arguing about the best way to pray...

A priest, a minister and a guru sat discussing the best positions for prayer, while a telephone repairman worked nearby.

The priest said,

"Kneeling is definitely the best way to pray.

The minister replied,

"No, I get the best results standing with my hands outstretched to Heaven."

"You're both wrong," the guru said.

"The most effective prayer position is lying down flat on the floor."

No longer able to contain himself, the telephone repairman interrupted:

"Hey, fellas!

"The best prayin' I ever did

was when I was hangin' upside down from a telephone pole."

Now there's a man who is in touch with his desperate need for God's *help!*

If we're looking for a religious role model to follow:

the guy hanging upside down from a telephone desperately praying for help is probably not a bad option.

But beware: role models - religious or otherwise - can be a dangerous thing. Like heroes and celebrities and star athletes, role models can disappoint us.

What with the recent escapades of Tiger (Deep in the) Woods... and Big Ben "at work"...

we ought all to be rather leery of admiring people in the limelight, or thinking of any famous person (other than Jesus) as worthy of emulation.

Today's reading from the Gospel of Luke reminds us that our religious role models are more likely to be found

by looking away from the more prestigious characters on the scene and paying attention to those who seem out-of-place, or out-of-sorts, or even sometimes out of their minds.

Jesus is invited to the home of an impressive religious figure,
Simon the Pharisee.

Luke tells us that Jesus

went to the Pharisee's house and took his place at the table.

In the ancient world, where one sits at the table is a matter of honor and prestige,
the closer to the host, the higher the honor.

Jesus lived in a world of strict protocol,
of long-standing custom,
deeply entrenched by years of religious tradition.

Simon the Pharisee had risen near the top of his religious culture
by doing all the right things,
by knowing and following all the protocols of Jewish life.

So Jesus finds himself in a socially and religiously precarious position
when a nameless woman of the city enters Simon's house,
approaches Jesus, and begins to touch him.

The woman is given no name,
but that does not mean she is unknown to those gathered at Simon's house.
She is known in that city well enough - known to be a sinner.

But like in last week's story
when Elijah was sent by God to go to the home of a nameless widow
who turns out to be the instrument of God in Elijah's life,
so this woman becomes an opportunity
for Jesus to proclaim the gospel of forgiveness.

The nameless, sinful woman of the city
begins to weep and to bathe Jesus' feet with her tears,
and dry his feet with her hair.

Then she repeatedly kisses his feet as she anoints them with ointment
from her alabaster jar.

The scene is provocative.

If there had been paparazzi in those days, they would have been all over it.
We'd be seeing this picture on the tabloid rack at the supermarket:
The righteous man, Simon the Pharisee, who keeps all the commandments,
looking on, as Jesus receives the extravagant attentions
of this woman of the city, whose only name is "sinner."

Yet whom does Jesus commend?
.....The sinful woman,

*whom Jesus says has shown great love
and whose faith has saved her.*

And whom does he chastise?

.....The upstanding member of the religious elite.

The point to be taken here, apparently,
is that our standing before God

has more to do with our acceptance of God's mercy in humility
than with our earning of God's favor by our strict righteousness.

Like the telephone repair man, it's all about being aware of our need for God's help.

Jesus has another way of talking about this.

He says, in so many words, that true religion has to do with loving God.

True religion has to do with opening one's heart to receive God's love.

Anything else, that doesn't lead to receiving and returning the love of God
is mere religious pretension.

Jesus contrasts two debtors,

one forgiven a small debt which he likely could have repaid;

and one who was forgiven a great debt,

so large it could never have been repaid.

Who will love the master more, Jesus asks?

This one who is so deeply and painfully aware of his desperate situation

is in a better position to receive the gift of salvation

as God wishes to give it:

abandoning all pretense,

awash in gratitude,

overwhelmed by love.

So what is Simon to learn from this little exchange with Jesus?

First of all, Jesus' power of discernment is astonishing

since he seems to know exactly what Simon is thinking.

Jesus' comments must cut to the quick,

either filling Simon with remorse for his thoughts,

or, if Simon is unable to tolerate such feelings of remorse,

filling him with indignant rage for being chastised by Jesus.

We are not told how Simon responds -

as the gospels so often do not tell us;

we are left to ponder how we might have responded to Jesus

if we were in Simon's seat;

and how we might yet respond.

In these days of celebrity management and media spin-doctoring

it's hard to know whether the public remorse

we see in Tiger's tears and in Ben's promises of reform

are worth the pixels they are digitized on.

For that matter, we cannot know whether this nameless woman's tears are genuine
or just a manipulative display
attempting to gain a better name for herself in the city.

The only way we know, is that Jesus knows, and he tells us.
Jesus knows her heart.
And he knows Simon's heart as well.
And he knows your heart and mine.
The bad news is: No one can hide from Jesus.
The good news is: No one needs to.
Jesus sees us completely, and loves us unfailingly.

Now we may wonder
how a person might go from being self-righteous and arrogant like Simon,
to the lowly, humble, poverty of spirit seen in this sinful woman.
For a little help with this question
we turn our attention to another famous character:
the Apostle Paul.

In today's reading from Galatians,
we get the story of how Paul turned 180 degrees
from being a hard-wired, fire-breathing zealot for Judaism,
violently persecuting the church of God and trying to destroy it,
to becoming THE GREAT Christian evangelist of all time.

A few weeks ago we read Paul's Damascus road experience
in which the Lord confronted and blinded Paul for a time
so that Paul eventually could see the truth of who Jesus is.
And today we hear what happened after that dramatic moment.

Paul, formerly Saul, had received
a world-shattering, confidence-toppling,
life-changing, heart-transforming wake-up call from God.
And he recognized it was going to take him some time to sort things out.

So, instead of jumping right in with both feet
(which was more Peter's style)
Paul withdrew to Arabia, then to Damascus.
Paul sought out solitude.
He disciplined himself to seek God in prayer
and to come to grips with what he had learned about himself
and the direction of his life.

You see, by changing his direction, Paul had a lot to lose.

He had already, at a young age, attained great heights in what he calls Judaism, a term that is used nowhere else in the New Testament, and in those days was reserved only for the most fervent religious zealots.

But In this period of solitude,
Paul began to realize how much his life and salvation
depended on the grace of God,
rather than on how much he could impress others, or God,
with his religious fervor.

But clearly, the change of heart in Paul was complete
as he went on to become known for his zeal
in proclaiming the very faith he once tried to destroy.

In the Old American idiom, that means
Paul became known for “Eating Crow”
or “Eating Humble Pie,”
which is the humiliation of admitting that you were dead wrong
after taking a strong position on some matter.

That is something we can appreciate
since to admit being wrong is just as out of fashion today
as it ever was in 1st century Judaism.

So will the real religious role model please stand up?
Is it Simon the Pharisee
who maintains an upright standard of conduct
priding himself in his moral strength and traditional status
keeping every jot and tittle of the law?
Or is it the nameless, sinful woman
who is so deeply in love with God
that she risks social humiliation to express her gratitude?
Or is it the zealous Paul,
who has no choice but to admit he was dead wrong
and turn to the very faith he was seeking to destroy?

Truth is, we find a little of ourselves in all these people.
That's the wonder and grace of the biblical story.
So the next time you're sitting at the place of prestige,
beware lest you earn Jesus' stinging rebuke.
And the next time you are painfully aware of your sin,
have courage that God still loves you dearly.
And the next time you're hanging upside down from the telephone pole of life
give thanks that God has allowed you to be in a position
to truly receive the gift of amazing grace.