

Proper 6(c)
Lk 7.36-50
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I know that I am easily amused, but one of the things that entertains me as I drive along in the tedium of traffic is to read unusual signs.

For instance, I shared with the Sunday School class last week an interesting notice that appears just on the Mount Pleasant side of the Ravenel Bridge... You will remember that an old hotel was once there, which eventually was purchased by a Church. Well, the Church apparently didn't make it at that location either, but the sign is still there, proclaiming the name of the former congregation in large letters *GRACE*... and directly under is the realtor's message which reads *AVAILABLE*.

And on the West Ashley side of town, there is an even more interesting sign, just at the driveway of St. Francis Hospital... It proclaims for all the world to see, *Glenn McConnell Improvement*. How interesting! Has the Senator and Holy Communion's native son gotten a nice new haircut? Joined a Health Club? Purchased a new Confederate Cannon? Just what are these improvements?

Well, of course it is the Glenn McConnell PARKWAY that is being improved (actually widened) and not the Senator himself...

But it is a happy coincidence that these two little interesting signs provide something of an illustration for today's scripture readings...

All too often, we religious folk attempt our self-improvement projects...expending a great deal of effort in the process... but we ignore the signs that read *Grace Available*.

In other words, we spend much more time seeking a righteousness of our own devising... and far too little time seeking the transforming power of the Spirit.

Now let me say quickly, I would be the last person on earth to deny that every Christian is called to lead a virtuous life. We certainly are. Striving for holiness is not something for which any Christian is "let off the hook."

But what happens when all the "power" of the Gospel, when all the leverage in a religion, is measured by *our* achievement, rather than in God's rescue of our flawed and fallen nature?

All three readings from Holy Scripture this morning cry out for a treatment of God's grace and mercy in the face of human sinfulness.

David, the man *after God's own heart*, lusted after another man's wife, took her for himself in the most tawdry way, and then, when he couldn't manipulate the situation to his advantage, arranged for the death of Uriah the Hittite. *King David: the adulterer, the liar, the murderer.* Hollywood would love the script, but not much of a political campaign slogan, is it?

Peter, the Prince of the Apostles, the "rock" on which the church was to be built, was overwhelmed by peer pressure. He who had seen for himself a direct revelation from heaven, and who had made his startling speech of the inclusive love of God in Christ, *Truly, I perceive that God shows no partiality...* this same Peter lapsed into a prejudicial attitude towards Gentile converts, and suffered for it a stinging rebuke from St. Paul:

When I saw Peter, I rebuked him to his face, for he was clearly wrong.

We Anglo-Papalists may take comfort that in this case, Peter was evidently *not* speaking *ex Cathedra*.

Simon the Pharisee, a man who knew a thing or two about the rules of morality and portraying just the "right" kind of image, was appalled that his houseguest, the itinerant rabbi from Nazareth, should allow a woman of some very questionable credentials, to weep and make a fuss over him. It was distasteful. It was undignified. It was inappropriate to the office of his high calling. But Jesus preached a little sermon for Simon to help the old boy see things a little more clearly.

What our scripture readings have done for us this morning is to give us a little catalogue... and just a small sampling at that ... of the only empirically demonstrable Christian Doctrine: *sin*.

David was not just any King, but the best of Kings... and yet he was a liar and a murderer and an adulterer.

Peter, the Rock on which the Church was built, in a moment of insecurity, said things he knew in his heart he did not believe in order to please the crowd.

Simon the Pharisee knew about the rules of religion, but the rules did not save him from his own blind hypocrisy.

That's what happens when a religion invests itself in the rules. When all its efforts go into giving the illusion of the successful life...

It causes damage in all sorts of ways.

First, it damages us on a psychological as well as a spiritual level. It damages us because we **know** what is expected, and in spite of our best efforts, we can't do it. We've never kept our New Year's resolutions, much less the Ten Commandments.

And if we can't live up to the law, and yet we believe that everyone, including God expects us to, then we have no resort but hypocrisy. We all become Simon the Pharisee, pretending that we are better than those other sinners out there.

And the great tragedy, the very great tragedy, my friends, is that there are millions and millions of people who even call themselves Christians.. who have never taken their faith beyond that small flirtation with rules. And in a world where every one of us is hurting. In a world where every single person who has ever ventured through a church door has his own personal tragedy, even if it is deeply hidden... being reminded endlessly of the rules is not very satisfying.

And may I say, the pendulum swing in the opposite direction is not very attractive either! Have you ever been around Christians who spent too much time telling you about their shortcomings? A couple of years ago, at a clergy gathering, a young man stepped up to the microphone and confessed things to the whole crowd that were, shall we say, more than a little shocking! Things that I thought would have been better dealt with in the privacy of the confessional. But in a certain type of religious gathering, it seems that the penitents, having heard the public confession of their neighbor, have to do them one better... and before you know it, the prayer meeting sounds more like an episode of the Jerry Springer Show!

And friends, to my way of thinking... the only thing that may be more annoying than someone who pretends to be *better* than he is..... is someone who exaggerates how *wicked* he is!

It gets very tiresome, doesn't it? And ultimately, the hypocrite and the exaggerator are both afflicted by the same disease: *pride*. They are trying to shape and manipulate the perception that others have of them.

But there is one more person in all our scripture readings that we haven't talked about yet. David and Peter and Simon get all the headlines.

But quietly, transparently, vulnerably, sits the woman at the feet of Jesus.

She neither pretends that she is someone she is not... nor makes more of her sinfulness than is appropriate. She simply knows to whom she may turn for salvation.

She is the one person in today's readings most worthy of emulating.
She is the model for all Christian behavior.

For the power of the Gospel is the amazing, merciful loving kindness of our God, who would with grace and mercy stretch out his arms on the hard wood of the cross, in order that you and I could know the freedom of forgiveness.

And just think what happens when we know that freedom?

We don't have to fear what any man may think. We don't have to pretend.

O hypocrisy, where is your victory? Hypocrisy, where your sting?

Can you see how liberating it would be to live in the power of the Gospel? We are freed from the “pressure” of presenting to our children our spouses and friends an unachievable ideal. We are freed to let them see our human failings, transfigured by God’s grace.

In every relationship, in every endeavor, we are free to bask in the Glory of God’s redemption. And having received such love and forgiveness, we are enabled more and more, through sanctifying grace, to offer grace and forgiveness to a broken and sinful world.

Simon, Do you see this woman? I entered your house, you gave me no water for my feet, but she has wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many are forgiven, for she loved much; but he who is forgiven little, loves little. Then those at Table with him began to say to themselves, Who is this, who even forgives sins? And Jesus said to the woman, your faith has saved you; go in peace.

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