

“A Woman Thirsts”

Luke 7:36-50

Richard C. Allen

March 6, 2016

South Glastonbury

Connecticut

In the wilderness, one thirsts. Water is in scarce supply. One has to know where there is an oasis or a well. Those who know the location of the wells are the ones who thrive. My summer in the Sahara in 1968 helped me understand this. At an oasis called Tahoia, we watched Tuareg women dismount from camels and carefully fill their water bladders at the local well. Among these nomadic traders, thirst is a constant companion. Knowing where the water can be found makes all the difference. Water is the difference between life and death. Later that day, I spoke with one of the Tuareg women and she allowed me to purchase the cross she was wearing around her neck. It is the Cross of Agadez, or, in French, le Croix d'Agadez. I am wearing this cross this morning as a way of recalling her thirst and also her knowing where the water could be found.

In the Gospel story for today, we meet a woman who is thirsty. She is thirsty for a commodity that was in desperately short supply. She was thirsty for forgiveness. It seems she had been asking for it, but had found it not; not from her neighbors, nor from the priest, nor from herself. She was thirsty and she hadn't been able to locate a functioning well. The wells she had located were all dry. So, it's in desperation that she invites herself into the home of a local authority where Jesus is a guest for lunch. Perhaps he will be the well she's been seeking to slake her thirst. For her, it feels like a matter of life and death.

This is where the story takes an unexpected turn. Noticing that Jesus is a guest in this house, she assumes the role of host and proceeds to lavish upon him all the gestures of hospitality known to her culture. She bathes and kisses his feet. She uses her hair to dry his toes. She anoints his head with oil. She massages his hands. I imagine she brings him some iced tea with a sprig of mint. In short, she loves him with an extravagant welcome. She puts the owner of the house to shame! Though she is the one who thirsts, she treats this guest as if he were the one with the thirst. It's an astonishing role reversal. The one who desperately needs to be loved is the one who pours out the love.

Jesus now perceives exactly what's going on. He senses the woman's thirst for forgiveness. And he is grateful for her hospitality. He is the oasis she has sought. He does not judge her. In fact, he admires her. He admires her spirit, her spunk. He admires her faith. He will not let her faith go unnoticed. He looks her in the eye and declares, "Your sins are forgiven. Your faith has saved you. Go in peace."

One can image this woman as she departs the house. She is dancing now. She is kicking up her heels. She is a new woman! Born anew. Her burden is lifted. She has been to the well of Living Water!

I've always wished Luke had written the next chapter in this woman's life story. He sort of leaves us hanging. But there is a hint that she becomes one of the disciples, that she becomes more willing to forgive the people who have taken advantage of her, that she gains a new reputation in the village. She becomes known as one who is willing to forgive.

In a way, this is the hope of the Gospel. Having experienced the relief and the release that come with being forgiven, we will be shaped by that experience of grace, and we will become the forgiving individuals and the forgiving community God hopes we will be. This is what it means to be a light in the world.

When parents bring their children to receive the Sacrament of Baptism, I give them a bold charge to let their home be a place where forgiveness is both offered and received. As children experience forgiveness from their moms and dads, they become forgiving human beings in their own right. I am guessing that the woman in Luke's Gospel story didn't have that fundamental experience of forgiveness in her home as a child. Like so many of us, she reached adulthood knowing something was missing, something was missing from her spiritual formation.

When she maneuvers her way into the home of that local authority, it's as if she is longing for this missing piece to be found. If you've ever worked on a 1000 piece jigsaw puzzle only to discover there is a piece missing, you know that feeling of incompleteness. You look under the table and under the sofa and behind the curtains. You write a letter to the manufacturer. You go on-line. You do whatever you have to do to find that missing piece.

In approaching Jesus that day, this woman knows she is missing something of great value and maybe can't quite put her finger on what it is. She just knows she feels bad about her life and doesn't know what to do about it. Jesus seems to know that what she needs is a word of forgiveness, a blessing, a word of affirmation, an assurance that her soul need no longer be burdened, but set free.

If you were to ask me about the most powerful religious experiences of my life, all of them would have to do with either forgiving or being forgiven. And if you were to ask me about the darkest times in my life, I would recall times when I chose not to forgive or when someone chose to withhold it from me.

This forgiveness business is hard work. It is wilderness work. I believe God meets us in our thirst to give and receive forgiveness and finds loving ways to make it happen. It is because I believe this in my heart that I remain in the greatest of hope. Amen!