

St. Mary Magdalene, Penitent
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University Lutheran Chapel
Minneapolis, Minnesota

✧ Jesu juva ✧

PENITENCE, FORGIVENESS AND DEVOTION: MARY MAGDALENE AS ICON OF THE CHURCH
Proverbs 31:10-31; Song of Solomon 3:2-4a; 8:6-7; Luke 7:36-50

Grace, Mercy and Peace be unto you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior
Jesus Christ. Amen

Today in the Holy Gospel lesson we find Jesus invited to dinner at the house of Simon the Pharisee. Jesus accepts the invitation from this Simon and sits down to eat with him. Eating together in the Scriptures is an important event. It signifies a fellowship between people. Normally people only ate with people of like mind and rank. And so the Pharisee who considers himself to be a righteous man invites the famous rabbi to eat with him. He did not invite the sinful woman who comes in uninvited to give her devotion to Jesus. Indeed, he was disgusted by what he saw happening. This woman has come into his house, making a scene over Jesus, weeping at his feet, wiping them with her hair, touching his feet with her hands and lips - and she is a known sinner of that city. And so Simon says inwardly "This Man [Jesus], if He were a prophet, would know who and what manner of woman this is who is touching Him, for she is a sinner." It was a disgusting display not only because of what the woman was doing, but also because Jesus, this supposedly great and holy man, called a prophet by many, was allowing her, an unclean and sinful person to touch him.

After all, if Jesus were truly holy and righteous, who should have received His attention here and had access to Him, the known sinner who had openly broken God's Law, or the Pharisee who was known for his righteous keeping of the Law? A few minutes ago we sang the Introit from Psalm 119 which begins: "Blessed are the undefiled in the way, who walk in the law of the Lord!" This seems to point to Simon the Pharisee, whose life as a Pharisee was built around the keeping of God's Law. The law was His delight and he was outwardly righteous. He deserved to have Jesus over for dinner, for they were, he supposed, cut from the same cloth, both righteous and servants of the Living God.

But Jesus gives this sinful woman greater access to His person than He gave to Simon. He would sit down and eat with Simon, but this woman He allowed to actually touch and caress His feet, to kiss them with her lips; to drench them with her tears and wipe them with her hair, to anoint them with precious oil. This makes no sense, for she certainly was not "undefiled in the way" and did not "walk in the law of the Lord." Yet she receives His blessing. The Psalm seems to favor the Pharisee, but our Lord favors the sinner. Why?

Because the Pharisee lived a life of empty obedience. Yes, his life was built around the keeping of God's Law. Yes, he was an outwardly righteous man. Yes, he tried to walk in the law of the Lord and keep it undefiled. But He did so without much love for Him who gave the Law. And so Jesus first shows him his error in the short parable about the two debtors and then chastens him openly and says: "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for My



feet, but she has washed My feet with her tears and wiped them with the hair of her head. You gave Me no kiss, but this woman has not ceased to kiss My feet since the time I came in. You did not anoint My head with oil, but this woman has anointed My feet with fragrant oil. Therefore I say to you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much. But to whom little is forgiven, the same loves little." Simon may have lived an exemplary outward life, but inwardly he was without much faith. For although he had invited Jesus to dinner, he doubted that he were even a prophet, yet alone the true God in the flesh who can forgive sins. And so his righteousness was a futile and empty righteousness - a faith which was all pretty and clean on the outside, but inwardly cold and dying, if not altogether dead.

Contrast the Pharisee's lack of love for Christ with the great devotion of the sinful woman. She comes into the Pharisee's house, unbidden, bursting in and disrupting the dinner. And she stands behind Jesus - not daring to confront Him directly, but standing there behind Him weeping and repentant. Then she falls to His feet in her penitence and her tears flow over His feet. She begins to wash His feet with those tears and then wipes them with her own hair. She, still in a posture of humility and penitence, kisses His feet, and then anoints them with fragrant, sweet smelling oil. She comes in true devotion to our Lord, not seeking to meet Him as an equal, having no righteousness to offer, only bringing her sins, her repentant tears, and the sweet oil of faith. And Jesus responds to her bold, yet humble devotion, not with chastisement for her sins or with anger over her imposition on His person and time; but with blessing: "Your sins are forgiven... Your faith has saved you. Go in peace."

Whether this woman was Mary Magdalene or not, we simply do not know from the Scriptures. But her faith was certainly the same as that of Mary Magdalene's. Mary had been possessed by seven demons, according to both Mark 16 and Luke 8. Seven demons, demons filled with all manner of evil, demons which, working their internal torment in her life, produced all manner of outward sin. Tradition has it she was a prostitute. Yet this one, so very unclean and sinful, finds mercy in Jesus. She has no outward works to bring to gain His favor, no righteousness of her own. She must meet Him as a beggar in the utter humility of helplessness. And according to the Gospels, she is cleansed of the possession; all seven demons having come out of her. Henceforth she clings devotedly to Jesus, just as the woman in Simon's house clung to Him. She followed Him through the rest of His ministry, witnessed His death, His burial. She came that first morning of the week to anoint His dead body, so deep was her love and devotion that even His death did not diminish it. And when encountering the empty tomb, she alone stays, weeping at the place where her Lord should have been found. And she is not disappointed, for the risen Christ appeared to her and spoke peace simply by saying her name: "Mary." Such love and devotion toward Jesus results from faith which has received His grace so richly. Much was forgiven Mary Magdalene, and she therefore loved greatly in return.

We do not preach these things to merely give honor to these faithful women. We preach about them, because in them we see the Church and see ourselves. Some would like to think of themselves and of their church as being the congregation of the righteous: the good people, the one's who live neat and clean lives according to God's Law, who are unsullied for the most part by what is around them. No, they do not claim to be perfect, but close to it. Like Simon, they think they deserve to have fellowship with Jesus, deserve a place at the table with Him. But these who are self-righteous, have little love or devotion for Jesus, for they see little need of Him, and ask little of Him. Their faith grows self-reliant and cold. There is no longing for Jesus, only disgust at the filthy sinners whom He receives.

But this is not how the true Church is. This is not how true faith encounters our Lord. The true Church is rather like the sinful woman, and like Mary Magdalene, and like all of the saints before who came to our Lord despising themselves in true penitence and looking to Him for mercy and life. This sort of Christian sees her fallen state, sees how miserably sinful she really is, and longs for Him who alone can cleanse her and raise her up. She is like the Shulamite in Proverbs who rises up from her bed and seeks her Lord throughout the city until she finds Him. And when she finds Him she clings to Him and will not let Him go. She throws herself at His feet, pours out her tears of repentance at His feet, offers her prayers and petitions and faith as a sweet smelling oil. She is foul to the world, but to our Lord she is the most beautiful on account of her need and devotion.

And the Lord has great mercy on her, forgives her sins, raises her up, and speaks loving peace to her. He crowns her with His own righteousness and washes her clean in the waters of Holy Baptism. He speaks kindly to her through the Word of His Holy Gospel, and brings her into His father's house to sit as His Bride at the great marriage feast of Holy Communion. She who was most despised in her sinfulness, becomes the most exalted among people through Jesus' grace; yet never forgetting that it is not by her own doing that she has attained such honor, but completely by the Lord's mercy. And thus she lives her life as a devoted Bride to her Husband and Lord. She seeks to do Him good, by keeping His Word and bearing the fruits of faith, confession of Christ and good works toward others. As the good wife in Proverbs, she takes care of her own household, and extends her hand to the poor and needy without. In her, her husband's reputation is upheld and He says: "Many daughters have done well, but you excel them all." He loves her not because of her beauty but because of her faith and devotion to Him, for: "Charm is deceitful and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the Lord, she shall be praised." So is the Church in relation to our Lord as the penitent, sinful harlot become the forgiven Bride.

And where do we see ourselves in all of this? With the Pharisee who thought Himself righteous and doubted Jesus on account of His great mercy to sinners? Or do we see ourselves as one of the penitent, undeserving one's who have nothing to offer our Lord, but instead beg at His feet? True Christians always count themselves among the sinful beggars. For no matter how good we may seem on the outside, we know that in us there is nothing good except that which we have been given and has been begun in us by God's grace. (And that is not our work, but His in us.)

We are the debtor in the parable who owed much, and our Lord is the creditor. You see the Pharisee didn't recognize this, nor did those who sat at dinner and asked: "Who is this who even forgives sins?" They could not see Jesus for who He was, the true and only Son of God who has the power over life and death, over judgement or forgiveness. But we do. And so we must come to Him in utter humility. For we have nothing with which to pay, even our lives would not repay the great debt we owe on account of our sins. And coming in such penitent humility and devotion, He forgives.

The one who is forgiven little, loves little in return. It is a small thing to him. But the one who is forgiven much loves much. Her devotion knows no end. She cannot bear to be parted from her Lord, but seeks Him constantly where He may be found. And so she is constantly living in her Baptism, daily repenting and seeking His grace, confessing her sins and receiving Holy Absolution from the mouth of His servant, and coming to His table to eat and drink His body and blood in Holy Communion, wherein she is again joined with Him in Holy unity as a member of His Bride the

Church. This is the kind of devotion our Lord seeks. And when we seek Him thus, He again pours out the richness of His grace upon us, forgiving and cleansing us anew, that we may have life in Him. He says to us again: "Your sins are forgiven... Your faith has saved you. Go in peace."

And thus forgiven, cleansed, and enlivened by Him, the song of the righteous becomes our song: "Blessed are the undefiled in the way, who walk in the law of the Lord... Unless Your Law had been my delight, I would then have perished in my affliction. I will never forget Your precepts, for by them You have given me life." Come then, and in true faith and devotion, receive that forgiveness, life and peace our Lord gives at His table, and be joined again to Him who is your soul's delight. Seek Him, hold Him, and do not let Him go. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, to life everlasting.

✠ Soli Deo gloria ✠