

Redwoods Presbyterian Church  
Larkspur, California  
June 9, 2013

Psalm 5:1-8; Luke 7:36-8:3  
"A Merciful God"

In the movie "Luther," an early scene portrays Martin Luther wrestling with the character and intentions of God.

"Have you ever dared to think that God is not just?" Luther asks his mentor, an elder monk. "He has us born tainted by sin, then He's angry with us all our lives for our faults, this righteous Judge who damns us, threatening us with all the fires of hell!"

"Martin, what is it you seek?" the old monk asks.

"A merciful God! A God whom I can love. A God who loves me," replies Luther.

I believe with Matthew Fox that we are born blessed. There's no such thing as "original sin." Fox prefers the term "original wound." He writes in the book *A New Reformation* that the term "original wound" better describes the separation humans experience on leaving the womb and entering the world – a world that is often unjust and unwelcoming – than does the term "original sin." We come into the world blessed and affirmed and we are wounded along the way and then do things that are not helpful. Jesus helps us get back to our true selves.

The so-called sinful woman in the gospel story today seeks a merciful God and she finds this God in Jesus. During our prayers of confession we often say, "God is merciful and just and forgives all our sins." Jesus demonstrates this today. Luther would do well to remember this story.

The theme of God's mercy continues in a broader context in the movie "The Color Purple."

Traveling blues singer Shug Avery has been estranged from her pastor father for decades, because of her decision to sing secular music.

One morning, while she's visiting her hometown, she decides that she feels like singing. She opens the local "juke joint" and begins singing her signature song. As a crowd gathers around the singer, the scene cuts to her father's church.

As he is preaching, sounds from the juke joint drift in through the open windows. Someone in the congregation prompts the choir to begin singing "God

Might Be Trying to Tell You Something." As the choir gets louder, Shug hears and begins singing along.

As the song progresses, she leads everyone from the juke joint (band and all) to the church. She walks up to her father and puts her arms around him. She whispers, "See, daddy, even sinners have soul." He returns her embrace as tears fill her eyes.

Shug is the teacher of God's grace and mercy in this story. She knows that God loves her and accepts her and by her appearance in this manner she brings out the loving, accepting part of her father.

The woman in the gospel story today is teacher. She enters the house of judgment and goes straight to Jesus the source of love and acceptance. In her love and actions she not only shows what a good host would customary do, provide items for welcoming and cleansing, but she helps Simon, the legalistic Pharisee, see how his theology is pretty messed up.

Simon reveals the judging part in human beings and Jesus reveals the loving, accepting and merciful God in human beings, the part expressed by Shug's father in the end.

Jan Richardson writes in her website "The Painted Prayerbook" that, "Once again we see Jesus' persistent refusal to distance himself from us. From the hungry, from the sick, from those who have lost their way, from the outcast, from those burdened by the labels and names and roles laid upon them: Jesus refuses to turn away.

"And not only does he resist turning away; he welcomes those who risk making their way to him. He recognizes and elevates those who push beyond the barriers and boundaries and rebuffs: the woman, so long bleeding, who reaches out for the hem of his robe; the children who gather around him; the women who, in every gospel, come to anoint and bless him, who see him as no one else does.

"In this passage from Luke, in this woman's lavish gesture, we see how love pours itself out...in an offering that springs from the depths of who we are.

"Love makes its way past the labels, breaks through the burdens of prejudice and stereotype and bias. This woman who has been set free by Jesus, and who now comes to anoint him: she knows this. She knows how love looses us, how it bridges the distance between us, how it calls us to recognize and respond to the holy in our midst.

“With such clarity and grace, she illuminates who Jesus is. With his response, Jesus illuminates who we are: not defined by the sins of the past but by the love and grace of the present.”

We are not told what the woman’s sins are so we put them down to the sins of the world – universal in all humanity. You can imagine how God is pained by what human beings have done and are doing in the world. We deserve God’s judgment but God comes with grace and mercy.

In the amazing movie “The Mission,” Captain Mendoza, played by Robert De Niro, has killed his own brother in a fit of jealous rage and is doing penance. In a huge bundle he drags all the weapons of his former life - he had been a mercenary and slaver.

He is relieved of his burden when one of the Indians takes a knife and - instead of killing him as the viewer and perhaps Captain Mendoza fears - cuts the rope. The image is all the more intense in that it was the Indians on whom Mendoza preyed and took away into slavery.

Instead of wiping human beings off the face of the earth, God shows mercy. Isn’t that why we come to church every Sunday morning? We know that we are loved and accepted and freed from anything that might bind us. Here we meet a merciful, loving and accepting God. Here we offer our love to each other in the sharing of our joys and concerns and we sing praises to God and are inspired to go out and be God’s loving and caring disciples.

We serve a merciful God, we follow a loving and accepting Jesus, and we incorporate the Holy Spirit to be merciful, loving and accepting to ourselves and all we meet.

There’s a postscript to this sermon. It has to do with the Pharisee’s judgment of the woman. There is something in his religious background that forbids a religious leader from being touched by a woman considered to be a sinner for he says, “If this man (Jesus) was a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him—that she is a sinner.”

Jesus is not interested in this kind of legalism. He is concerned more for the woman’s well-being. The Pharisaical approach here typifies how men have treated women down the centuries and even today. I asked two women this week how they thought women were treated today.

While they appreciated the great strides women had achieved to overcome patriarchy in general there were issues: there was still a glass ceiling, across the board women still get paid 70% of what men get, girls still take a back seat in our culture, and it is still difficult for women to advance in their careers.

Jesus would have none of that and I'm surprised that any Christian would think otherwise. Jesus freed and accepted as communicated at the end of the reading today and he welcomed them as equal followers and supporters of his mission.

This week I was in correspondence with a woman elder in the Mormon Church in Mesa, Arizona and she told me that she was invited to give the message in her church along with a male elder today – on Father's Day! What a surprise: A Mormon Church and Arizona and Father's Day! Talk about stereotypes being shattered.

I wrote to her and said; "All the best on your talk this Sunday. It's nice to know that your church has asked you, a woman, to speak on Father's Day! The best men affirm and value the gifts of women." That's a good place to end. Amen.