

Luke 7: 36-50

June 13, 2010 Christ Church, Middle Haddam

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“Because”? Or “so that”?”

Do we do good deeds because we have been forgiven, or do we do good deeds in hopes that—so that—we will be forgiven? Actually, I think it’s both. There’s been a long debate among historical and biblical scholars about this page called “Jesus Anointed by the Sinful Woman”. Jesus says, “her sins are forgiven, *for* she loved much.’ But, other translations, you see, construe this sentence as, “her sins have been forgiven; *therefore*, she loved much.” Which comes first, the chicken or the egg? Frankly, who cares: you need both!

I like to think that we do good things for others because we know that God loves us and, amazingly, miraculously, forgives us what we have done wrong. But I think it is equally of value if we do good things IN THE HOPES that God will forgive and love us—we are acting into that future salvation, acting in hope, when we do that, whereas when we do good things because we KNOW that God has already forgiven us, we are acting out of the joy of gratitude. Hope and gratitude are both wonderful emotions. It is well to feel each of them.

When the man on the 33th floor of the World Trade Center refused to leave the building on 9/11 without taking the woman in the wheelchair, who could not save herself, with him, do you

think he stopped to wonder: do I need to do this? Do I have a big enough store of good works in the bank so that I can just run out, save myself and leave her? Or, did he think, God has been good to me, so I will pick this woman up and carry her down 32 flights of stairs rather than leave her? I think neither of these thoughts entered his mind. I think he simply acted as he did because to do otherwise was, to him un thinkable. What about the other office workers who fled, and left the helpless woman to burn alive? Were they evil? No, simply self-interested. They did what most of us would have done.

The miracle is in the self-surpassing. Jesus emptied his life out for us. He deliberately went to death so that we might know how to sacrifice ourselves for others. In self-undoing, there is great redemption. In self-undoing, God steps into the gap left when the focus on self pulls away, and God offers meaning, grace, miracle.

The man who carried the woman out of the World Trade Center has undone himself, surpassed his normal humanity. That's what a hero is. He is filled with God within.

The prostitute at the Pharisee's house forgot her sinfulness. The Pharisee couldn't! He recoiled from her - even though, let's face it, what was she doing at his house in the first place! In front of Jesus, the Pharisee made a big pretense, a big sham, that he'd had nothing to do with this woman. It's a mini-drama akin to a Supreme Court Justice getting caught with a call girl. But look what SHE did: it is likely that she came from the Pharisee's bed directly to greet Jesus, having just thrown her clothes back on to cover her nakedness. But somehow she rose out of the shame of her prostitution and, seeing Jesus, gave him the sweet and intimate gifts of tears to wash his road-weary feet, her long hair to wipe them dry. The body she had

traded for coins became a beautiful gesture of embodied hospitality. Lust became love.

And why? Because she had already been forgiven? Sure. We all are. Because she hoped to be forgiven? Sure. We all hope that, too. But most of all, because she forgot herself, she reached beyond herself, and she offered love.

How do we go on living when we have done something so awful that it cannot be undone, and we are doomed to try to duck it, yet stare at it forever? There is no other way than to undo that self, to empty out the self that we despise, the self capable of doing that thing. We unzip it, strip it off, cast it away like a dirty garment—Scripture says our sin is filthy rags. And when we are again naked, defenseless, no longer clothed in the illusion of social respectability, when we no longer have even the illusion of self-sufficiency, ... then ... we are with God. And then we can serve God. We take the body that could do such a thing of harm and pain and shame, and we put it to work. We use our body to worship. And in that self-worship and sin-forgetting, we are redeemed. Every new act now becomes an act of redressment—we redress, reclothe ourselves in Christ.

So the prostitute worshipped Christ with her body—the body that so many had bought and sold before. And she cleaned his feet with her tears—the tears she had long ago forgotten how to shed for herself. And she dried his feet with her hair (the long hair that any respectable woman would have kept hidden).

Because God loved her and forgave her first? So that God would love her and forgive her? Who knows? God knows. Either way, what she did touched Jesus' heart. May we all do likewise!