

Jon Hauerwas – June 12, 2016 – “At the Feet of God”

I once heard a story on NPR about a woman with a compulsive gambling addiction. In all, she believes that she probably lost about \$300,000 – her entire life savings. And the way that she lost it is rather shocking. It was by playing the slots, one quarter at a time. There were times when she went to the store and bought a gallon of milk, but then never made it home. Instead, she took it with her to the casino, where it sat next to her for 12 hours and simply rotted.

She emptied out the safety deposit box, and sold everything in her home of any value at all. At times, she stole quarters from her grandchildren. And for months on end, she survived on peanut butter alone because spending money on anything else would decrease the amount she had left for gambling. Her husband left her, and she lived in a constant state of guilt and shame.

Well, in the end, what finally changed this woman’s behavior was some new information about a medication she was taking to help relieve her Parkinson’s disease. Doctors discovered that the drug she was taking could lead to compulsive behavior, so she stopped taking it. Soon, her tremors returned. But within weeks, she stopped gambling.

Her interview was tearful and remorseful. She regretted the wasted hours and the wasted money, and she spoke of trying to return her life to some state of normalcy. She remembers apologizing to her son for selling family items which, in her words, should have been his. And as she relayed his response, she was overcome with emotion.

“Mom, that’s all just stuff,” she remembers him saying as her life began to turn around more than three years ago. “But, what I really wanted all along was you, and you’re back.” She choked back tears as she retold the story, and I couldn’t help but hear the echoes of the prodigal son in reverse. The one who was lost had now been found and, by God’s grace, she had been welcomed home with open arms.

We are all human, which means that we are often too quick to judge. And yet, we also claim to be a people of redemption, which is one of the great themes of the Judeo-Christian tradition. In the Old Testament, God leads Ezekiel into a valley of dry bones. The scene is reminiscent of a battlefield where the fallen soldiers have failed to receive a proper burial. And God asks a question for the ages, saying, “Mortal, can these bones live?”

This is the same question that we could ask of the woman who kneels at the feet of Jesus in our New Testament lesson this morning. And it is the same question that we ask at the crucifixion and resurrection, and then wonder – either aloud or silently, if we truly believe. “Mortal, can these bones live?” In other words, “Can Jesus, a person of flesh and blood, a person who lived a life in many ways just like you and I, ultimately defeat the power of death and rise triumphantly from the grave?” Is that even possible? “Can these bones live?”

Do we truly believe in redemption and second chances, in new life and in resurrection? Or does the story always end with sorrow, and pain, and death? Ezekiel’s response was simple. “You know, Lord.”

Our New Testament lesson this morning tells us very little about this woman who is said to be a sinner. We don’t know what kind of sin or sins she committed and we don’t know what the underlying cause of her behavior was. Instead, we bear witness to the extravagance that she demonstrated by kneeling at the feet of Jesus and anointing him, of using her hair to spread the ointment on his ankles and his toes. And of kissing him. Yes. This was extravagant behavior. It was also scandalous. Why would Jesus allow this to go on? Why would he welcome these gestures, thus raising the eyebrows of everyone else in the room?

In a number of faith traditions, it is a sign of great faith to lay prostrate. That is with one's body on the ground. Face down. Arms outstretched. It is a sign of submission and of reverence. In such cases, laying prostrate is not an act of humiliation, as is the case of a victorious army binding the leaders of the opposition, hauling them before the victorious king, and subjecting them to pledge allegiance by kissing his feet.

No. This was not an act of humiliation, but rather an act of humility. Willingly humbling one's self. Pledging allegiance to one who has the power to forgive and the power to save. Our passage demonstrates a deeply emotional and spiritual longing for the very heart of God.

As I draw to a close this morning, I invite you to consider another passage from the Bible. Proverbs is a book that we don't speak about very often, but I am particularly drawn to the imagery of wisdom, personified as a woman.

The LORD created me at the beginning of his work,  
the first of his acts of long ago.  
Ages ago I was set up,  
at the first, before the beginning of the earth.  
When there were no depths I was brought forth,  
when there were no springs abounding with water.  
Before the mountains had been shaped,  
before the hills, I was brought forth—  
when he had not yet made earth and fields,  
or the world's first bits of soil.  
When he established the heavens, I was there,  
when he drew a circle on the face of the deep,  
when he made firm the skies above,  
when he established the fountains of the deep,  
when he assigned to the sea its limit,  
so that the waters might not transgress his command,  
when he marked out the foundations of the earth,  
then I was beside him, like a master worker;  
and I was daily his delight,  
rejoicing before him always,  
rejoicing in his inhabited world  
and delighting in the human race.

‘And now, my children, listen to me:  
happy are those who keep my ways.  
Hear instruction and be wise,  
and do not neglect it.  
Happy is the one who listens to me.

This is an image of wisdom as a small child, playing at the feet of God –  
delighting in God's presence.

And if wisdom was to sing, I imagine that it might sound like this:  
(Soloist to sing verses 1 and 4 of “All Hail the Power of Jesus’ Name).

We come to this place standing on the shoulders of spiritual giants. And we also come to kneel at the feet of God.

May it be so and all thanks be to God both now and forever. Amen.