

THE LENGTHS THAT SOME WILL GO TO

A sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Nadene Grieve-Deslippe on June 13, 2010
Crossroads United Church

1 Kings 21:1-21

Luke 7:36-8:3

The female personalities in the two readings for this morning stand in marked contrast to one another. One is named and one is unnamed. One is of regal status and the other is described simply as a woman in the city. The named woman is proud and arrogant and conniving. The unnamed woman is humble, contrite and vulnerable. Jezebel is not above lying to get what she wants but does not deserve. The unnamed woman places herself at considerable risk in sharing her vulnerability. She is subject to judgment and ridicule though her actions are honourable. The actions of Jezebel are far from honourable and there is not a hint of judgment or condemnation of her actions implicit in the passage. Condemnation of the actions of Jezebel and the weakness of Ahab ensues in the chapter, but in the reading for today we see again how the unjust can triumph-if for but a time- and how the upright and the righteous can be much maligned. One woman went to great lengths to lie and cheat an innocent man out of his birthright. And the unnamed woman went to great lengths to prove her devotion to Jesus. However, the comparison is not limited to the named and unnamed women, but is readily juxtaposed between the Pharisee and the Christ in the gospel.

These two men stand in equally as marked a contrast. Here are two religious leaders in the presence of a sinful woman. Simon the Pharisee saw himself as more righteous than the woman and distanced himself from her. Jesus recognized the need of the woman for forgiveness and acceptance. Simon was quick also to dismiss Jesus for seeming not to recognize the perceived lowlife that was kneeling in front of him, and yet the greater irony is the distinction between Simon and the unnamed woman. Though Jesus was a guest in the home of Simon it was the unnamed woman who extended to Jesus the hospitality that was the convention of the day.

While some may be inclined to allow the erotic implications of the woman's actions to eclipse the hospitable, it is clear that in Luke's telling the woman is proffering the hospitality that Simon withheld. Jesus interprets the woman's actions thusly: the water of her tears is the water usually offered to wash the dust from a traveler's feet; her kisses the kiss of welcome and the anointing for one coming in from a journey and having been exposed to the heat of the day. The behaviour of Simon towards Jesus stands in marked contrast to that of the unnamed woman. One went to great lengths to demonstrate her devotion and the other stopped short of even extending the hospitality conventions of the day.

Both the Hebrew text and the gospel lesson are great stories that remind us of the complexities of humanity. It is given to us by free will and choice to proffer good or ill by our actions and our attitudes. And perhaps it is in the attitudinal where free will becomes particularly nigglesome. Few of us would follow suit and act like Jezebel. We have been taught from a very young age not to take things that do not belong to us, and we would probably not choose to set a plan in motion that would result in a person being wrongly accused of a crime and punished for it. But oh the ease with which we might find the shoes of Simon to be a comfortable fit.

He readily jumps to conclusion about the worth of both the unnamed woman and Jesus. He judges Jesus quite harshly-readily dismissing him as a prophet because Jesus seems not to recognize what kind of a woman is touching him. Simon saw only the sinner, but Jesus saw the saint. Simon saw the tarnish on the life and soul of the woman but Jesus saw the redemption. Simon looked upon the woman with contempt and disdain- both for her reputation and for her act of overt devotion. Jesus saw the love that was motivating the woman. And we may need to confess only to ourselves that we have much more in common with Simon-both in attitude and action than we do with either the unnamed woman or the Christ.

Dr. Rachel Remen, a medical doctor and psychotherapist has written that the life in us is diminished by judgment far more frequently than by disease. Our own self-

judgment or the judgment of other people can stifle our life force, its spontaneity and natural expression. And it is very commonplace. It takes both the form of criticism and approval. When we approve of people we sit in judgment of them as surely as when we criticize them. Positive judgment hurts less than criticism, but it is still judgment, which harms in more subtle ways. (Remen-1996-35).

Approval can be withdrawn at any time. And surely Simon the Pharisee was guilty of being both critical and judgmental. He was judgmental of Jesus and the woman. Jesus was knocked off the pedestal when he failed to show disdain for the sinner who anointed him. And the woman did not have a snowball's chance of being viewed as anything other than a sinner. But Jesus was able to use the situation to enlighten Simon on how constraining judgment, criticism and misplaced approval can be.

A professional woman tells one of my favourite stories as she reminisced about her adolescence. As a teenager she had been tall and gangly and had bad skin. A family relative took it upon herself to instill confidence and a sense of self worth in the teen that loathed what she saw in the mirror. Once a month they would go shopping and have lunch together in one of New York City's finest eateries. The teen hated these excursions. The clothes that she was made to try on hung on her in an uncomplimentary way and she even tripped over her feet and fell skinning her knees and damaging her dress. Still her cousin helped her up, dabbed at the blood and insisted that they go to lunch anyway.

After a time the relative married and the teen was busy with professional training and a career, and the lunches ended. Some years later they resumed their shopping and lunches. There were obvious changes in the once gangly and unattractive youth who was now a stunning professional woman with poise and confidence. However, the relative still viewed the woman as an awkward teenager and the professional woman could not escape the unspoken expectations of her one time mentor.

She would sit down to lunch and slowly regress - spilling her wine, or dripping food on her dress. Once the strap of her purse caught on something and because she had not zipped it shut, the contents spilled all over the floor. Keys and wallet careened to the floor and lipsticks and other things rolled across the floor to rest in the vicinity of other patrons. The relative bore these incidents graciously and without comment, totally unaware of her role and the power of her private image. Indeed the life in us is diminished more by judgment than by disease.

The contrast between Simon and Jesus could not be more pronounced. Simon's understanding of righteousness caused him to distance himself from the woman. Jesus' comprehension of righteousness meant moving towards her, and receiving her act of devotion and offering unconditional acceptance and forgiveness in return. Too often we walk in the moccasins of Simon the Pharisee constrained by judgment and reluctant to accept that people can change. With ease we brand many with a figurative scarlet letter and shun and distance ourselves in perceived righteousness. We withhold hospitality and judge who is worthy to receive the conventions of grace, respect and acceptance. And the words of Jesus haunt us in our generation as we hear him say lovingly and respectfully to us, "The one to whom little is forgiven, loves little." Maybe, if we were honest, we may need to concede and repent the fact that we are the ones in greater need of forgiveness.

Many go to great lengths to get what they want-like Jezebel- caring little about who gets hurt in the process. And some go to great lengths to distance themselves from those that are judged to be inferior. It is not only those of questionable reputation but more significantly it is often the ones in greatest need that are shunned and judged; the person who is different, or challenged, or poor, jobless and homeless. And some go to great lengths to demonstrate their devotion like the unnamed woman. The one who is forgiven much, loves much, and lives in peace. May it be so for us. Amen.