

September 9, 2012

The Sunday Before Holy Cross

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Two narratives in the Gospel of St. Luke share a number of resemblances that should prompt a careful reader to compare them: the account of the paralytic lowered from the roof (Luke 5:17-26) and the story of the woman who washes the feet of Jesus with her tears (7:36-50).

Each story begins with Jesus seated in a house among a group of people. He is teaching in the first scene, and in the second he is eating in the home of a Pharisee named Simon.

Then, into each scene another individual is introduced: the paralytic lowered through the roof and the woman who enters carrying "an alabaster flask of fragrant oil." The drama in both stories is associated with the entrance of this new person.

Both of them are identified---by implication in the paralytic's case---as sinners, to whom Jesus graciously extends forgiveness. A specific motive for his forgiveness is indicated in each story. In the first instance, it is faith; Jesus, regarding the faith of those who bear the paralytic, says to him, "your sins are forgiven you." In the story of the sinful woman, the motive for forgiveness is love: "Therefore I say to you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she has loved much." The woman's love, nonetheless, is also an expression of faith, for Jesus says to her, at the end of the narrative, "Your faith has saved you."

The dramatic conflict in both accounts comes when those seated around Jesus object to what they see as his presumption in the declaration of forgiveness: "Who can forgive sins but God alone?" (5:21) And, "Who is this who even forgives sins?" (7:49).

Jesus, however, not only forgives sins; he also reads hearts. It is pertinent to Luke's point that Jesus is able to discern the disapproving thoughts of his critics. In the first story Luke tells us, "And the scribes and the Pharisees began to reason (*dialogizesthai*), saying, 'Who is this who speaks blasphemies?' . . . But when Jesus perceived their reasoning (*dialogismou*), he answered and said to them, 'Why are you reasoning (*dialogizesthe*) in your hearts?'"

In the second story Luke identifies Jesus' critic as a Pharisee named Simon. Of this Simon, Luke says, "Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw this,

he spoke in himself (*eipen en heavto*), saying, 'This man, if he were a prophet, would know who and what manner of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner.' Simon himself recognizes that the ability to read hearts is the mark of a prophet (7:39; cf. 1 Corinthians 11:24-25).

The narrator seems to relish the irony of Jesus' prompt response to Simon's inner thought: "Simon, I have something to say to you." This "something" is the parable of the two debtors, which leads to Jesus' contrast between the lackluster hospitality of Simon and the exuberant devotion of the woman.

Early in Luke's Gospel ancient Simeon had foreseen Jesus' prophetic ability to disclose man's inner discourse---"that the thoughts (*dialogismoi*) of many hearts may be revealed" (Luke 2:35).

Both these dramatic stories, which involve the forgiveness of sins and the reading of hearts, are marked by irony and paradox. Indeed, the witnesses to the healing of the paralytic commented, "We have seen paradoxes today!"(5:26) It is worth remarking that this is the only place in the New Testament where the Greek word paradox is found.

It is curious that we know the name of Simon, Jesus' host and critic, not from the narrator, but from the lips of Jesus in the story's dialogue. It is significant, moreover, that we know his name at all, for this is rarely the case for Jesus' adversaries. In the present instance it indicates, I believe, that Simon became a Christian and that it was he who supplied Luke's version of the incident.

That is to say, when Jesus directly challenged Simon- "Simon, I have something to say to you"-this judgmental Pharisee became aware, not only of the shabbiness of his hospitality, but also of the demonic quality of his thoughts. He began to experience a change of heart, a conversion, which would lead him, years later, to share with Luke the events of that day of grace, when a proud man was put down and a humble woman was exalted.

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