

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. *Amen.*

Friends, sometimes I find myself wondering what difference it all makes.

Confession and forgiveness of sins, I mean: what difference does it make?

Sometimes I find it easy to slip into thinking about forgiveness of sins as being some sort of private, personal exchange between God and me. I bring to God the things I've done which I ought not to have done, and confess those things I've failed to do. God forgives me. I carry on with a clean conscience. Until next Sunday at least, I'm good to go.

But if this is the case then perhaps we ought to follow the example of Emperor Constantine, who put off being baptized until he was on his deathbed. If we agreed to do this, we might then omit the confession of sin at the beginning of our services, with the result that our worship would be five minutes shorter. You can get a lot done in five minutes.

Indeed, some churches are omitting the confession of sin because it seems too penitential and not celebratory enough. It's a drag, a downer. And I suppose they may have a point: if confession and forgiveness at base are about trivial peccadilloes or some ghastly rehearsal of how bad we are, then why not just leave it out?

But friends, the fact is, it's much, much more than that. So just what difference does it make?

We might well ask the woman in today's gospel story what difference it made to her. We're not told much about her and what her life is like – Luke keeps a discreet distance away from explicit details, he's not concerned to satisfy our curiosity. But the fact is that she was well known in the city as a sinner.

Now a Pharisee has invited Jesus to eat with him, to enjoy his hospitality and share fellowship together. There's no sense of rivalry or suspicion here between the Pharisee and Jesus; the Pharisee just invites him as a guest, maybe to get to know him better: it's a friendly dinner. And so when this woman, a sinner, comes and anoints Jesus' feet, you can imagine the Pharisee having two responses: first, perhaps he is slightly embarrassed at this notorious woman being an uninvited guest. And second, he is mystified why his invited guest, supposedly a prophet, allows this woman to touch him.

In response, Jesus tells a brief parable, but we needn't occupy ourselves with that this morning, for what we are looking for is right in front of us. We are told that this uninvited guest is known in the city and what she is known as is a sinner. No matter what the nature of the sin was – and her fellow citizens probably knew – her life was laid open to everyone she would have come into contact with. We're not told her name, her age, her occupation, we only know that she was a woman, and a sinner. She was a woman, and hence not particularly powerful in that day and age, perhaps easily disregarded by those in power, and she was a sinner, and hence unwelcome among the righteous.

And so here is Jesus, a prophet in the story's terms, and in our terms the Messiah, reclining at table with a Pharisee. He not only doesn't recoil from her and rebuke her, he graciously accepts her lavish care and extravagant love, not minding that she crosses all sorts of cultural and social lines to do so.

In what Jesus does, accepting this woman as a person worthy of regard, and in forgiving her sins, he does nothing less than give her a new identity. It might be easy to miss, but in the first half of our reading, she is twice identified as a woman, a sinner. But at the end of the reading, Luke simply calls her 'the woman'. And Jesus himself no longer refers to her in the third person as if she were a mere object, or a problem to be dealt with. He addresses her directly: *your* sins are forgiven, *your* faith has saved you.

We find in this forgiveness of sins not the discharging of mere peccadilloes, and certainly not a rehearsing of how bad this person is. In the story of forgiveness of sins, we encounter the purest grace of God, which addresses this woman directly, which lifts her up and frees her rather than beating her down, which gives her a new identity and a new direction and a new life. This is the purest love of God.

And when she encounters the lavish love of God, she can hardly respond except with her own lavish display of gratitude and affection. Grace begets grace; love generates love.

It can hardly be a coincidence that the last few verses of our reading today highlight women who were apparently a major part of Jesus' ministry, who themselves had experienced deliverance and forgiveness. God's grace through Christ had not just made them feel better about themselves, although it certainly did that, but it reoriented their lives, it gave them new life, a new identity and sent them out into the world. What difference does it make? For them, it made all the difference in the world.

As with the woman in Luke's story, when we ourselves encounter this grace and love of God we are changed, and we become part of this 'difference in the world', participating in the work of Jesus. We are empowered by the Spirit to respond to those around us with the love and grace that we have found, to be a part of God's work in the world.

Fred Craddock, a professor of preaching and communication, tells a story that I think illustrates this nicely.¹

At the time, Fred taught in Oklahoma, and he and his wife got away to Gatlinburg, Tennessee for a short vacation. One night they went out for dinner, eagerly hoping for a quiet, private meal together.

As they sat waiting for their dinner, they noticed a distinguished looking white haired man working the room, moving from table to table greeting folks. To their dismay, he made his way over to them and started to make small talk. He asked Fred what he did for a living. When he heard that Fred taught preachers, the man replied "well, I've got a story I want to tell you," and pulled up a chair and sat with Fred and his wife. Craddock groaned inwardly.

¹ Jamie Buckingham told the story in his book, Power for Living. I have lightly edited it for space and clarity.

The man stuck out his hand. "I'm Ben Hooper. I was born not far from here across the mountains. My mother wasn't married when I was born so I had a hard time. When I started to school my classmates had a name for me, and it wasn't a very nice name. I used to go off by myself at recess and during lunchtime because the taunts of my playmates [hurt so much]. When I'd walk around town, I could feel people staring at me, wondering just who my father was."

Hooper went on to describe in some detail how he felt like an outcast in his own town, and even in his own church. When he was 12, a new preacher came. One day, leaving the church, he felt a big hand on his shoulder. It was the preacher. He looked right at Ben and asked the question that everyone seemed to have on his mind:

"Who are you, son? Whose boy are you?"

Hooper explained, "I felt the old weight come on me. It was like a big black cloud. Even the preacher was putting me down."

"But as he looked down at me, studying my face, he began to smile a big smile of recognition. "Wait a minute," he said, "I know who you are. I see the family resemblance. You are a [child] of God."

With that he slapped Ben across the [back] and said, "Boy you've got a great inheritance. Go and claim it."

The old man looked across the table at Fred Craddock and said, "That was the most important single sentence ever said to me." With that he smiled, shook the hands of Craddock and his wife, and moved on to another table to greet old friends.

Suddenly, Craddock remembered. On two occasions the people of Tennessee had elected a fatherless man to be their governor. One of them was Ben Hooper.

The simple act of this anonymous old Tennessee preacher made all the difference in the world to that child, showing him the grace of God, freeing him from, in this case, the sin of the community, giving him a new identity and a new life.

This is the mission of Jesus, a mission to which we too are called. When we say the confession of sin together, our lives are laid open and we join those words to what we know to be true: we have sinned, we have fallen short. As we confess our sins we ourselves are met by the purest love and grace of God and we receive forgiveness and new life, a new identity. And we are sent out into the world to share – no, to *unleash* – this powerful love and grace of God that we have encountered so that others too may be free. Sisters and brothers, what *more* could we hope to do in five minutes' time – or indeed, in a lifetime – than in this way to make a world of difference? *Amen.*