

Epiphany 7, 2017 Luke 7:36-50 Mercy's Children

"Oh my friend: Love makes the world of creation a possibility.... Look around yourself and see a universe saturated by the fragrance of love."

Simon, the Pharisee who invited Jesus for dinner might have done better if he had had these lines from Sufi poet, Ezzeddin Nasafi, tucked away somewhere under his heart for such an occasion as this. When things seem at their darkest, "Look around yourself, and see a universe saturated by the fragrance of Love."

The sweet fragrance of love was right there under Simon's nose, and the only thing he got a whiff of was the lamb roasting in the oven. Still, that other fragrance was there—the scent of her ointment wafted through the room, permeating it—filling it with the fragrance of love.

We don't know the backstory here. We don't know how the woman knows Jesus, what she has done to be regarded as 'sinful,' or what Jesus has said or done to inspire such an extravagant expression of gratitude and love. What we do know is that everywhere he goes, Jesus is spreading mercy like soft butter on bread fresh out of the oven.... feeding the hungry, teaching those yearning for a good word, healing the suffering, calling the wandering and lost ones home; welcoming the marginalized and the ostracized, and touching and receiving the touch of those regarded as 'unclean.' Through both act and word, Jesus announces to all with ears to hear and hearts to understand, that he will not be made unclean by anyone's touch!

Pope Francis has written a profoundly moving and grace-filled little book entitled, The Name of God is Mercy. He writes, "Jesus, seeing the crowds of people who followed him, realized that they were tired and exhausted, lost and without a guide, and he felt deep compassion for them." "What moved Jesus...[to action in every situation]... , writes Francis, was nothing other than mercy with which he read the hearts of those he encountered and responded to their deepest need." He saw only through eyes of mercy.

The Jewish law... this law meant to shape a holy people and their life together so that they might companion the Divine and be a light to the nations had somehow gone awry in its evolution. Such is the way our best intentions sometimes unfold. Even we who boldly claim to follow the one who said, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you," still sometimes speak and live in ways that utterly deny the merciful gaze.

We don't know the backstory for this morning's gospel reading, but let's face it--the woman is making a scene. Simon, a man highly respected in his community, is hosting a dinner party-- not a Pentecostal healing service! His wife and servants have gone to some effort to prepare a sumptuous feast for his guests, and Simon is eager to savour his meal-- and perhaps some stimulating repartee in the company of this impressive ... what? preacher? prophet? healer?...is he messiah? He is likely trying to figure that out! And then there is this woman! This woman, clearly not on the invitation list, has totally disrupted the meal and any conversation worth having! She kneels at his feet, and the only sound they hear is of her weeping! To make matters worse, she has come prepared! Anointing Jesus' feet with a fragrant ointment... allowing her hair to fall loosely over his feet. The whole scene is utterly indecent! But then, the woman is carried away... I imagine her growing quiet as she settles into her task-- letting go of her weeping and then, at first quietly and then with increasing joy, raising her voice in song, "How precious on the mountain are the feet of them who bring good news! Good News! Announcing peace, proclaiming news of happiness... our God reigns, our God reigns."

Jesus, is moved. After taking some time to soak in the goodness of her gesture, he turns to Simon. We don't know what Simon is thinking or feeling, except we know that under the law, and likely in his eyes, this woman is ritually impure and should not be touching Jesus. Further, if Jesus were a prophet he would know this. Is Simon angry? Surprised? Disappointed? Shocked? Curious? Outraged? Has his blood pressure gone through the roof?

I am going to re-read the first part of our gospel story and ask you listen entering in a sense of prayerful imagination. As I read, see Simon, Jesus, and the woman in your mind's eye. Is anyone else is at the table? What do you smell, and see, and hear? Imagine yourself in the story. Who are you? Are you Simon? His

wife? A servant? The woman? Jesus? A fly on the wall? What are you thinking and feeling as the story unfolds? What are your hopes? Your fears?

One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and took his place at the table. And a woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment. Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him—that she is a sinner."

Take a few moments and reimagine the scene in your mind. ... and discuss this with someone sitting near to you!

Not so long ago I listened as someone dear to me wailed through anguished tears, "Debbie, What I did was unforgivable. God will never forgive me. What I did was so wrong. I will never be forgiven. You don't know. You just don't know." I listened and tried to reassure her of God's mercy and forgiveness, but she refused to be comforted. If only she might look up from her blinding shame just long enough to glimpse the loving gaze of our merciful God! Divine forgiveness is as near as her next breath, and she just can't seem to raise her gaze. O that her grief might melt into the gutsy and lavish gratitude of that 'sinful' woman in our gospel story. The scent of gratitude rising up out of her shame would be a fragrant offering indeed.

Pope Francis writes, "Mercy will always be greater than any sin, no one can put a limit on the love of the all-forgiving God. Just by looking at him, just by raising our eyes from our selves and our wounds, we leave an opening for the action of his grace. Jesus performs miracles with our sins, with what we are, with our nothingness, with our wretchedness." "The name of God is Mercy" ... and we are mercy's children.

"Oh my friends: Love makes the world of creation a possibility.... Look around yourself and see a universe saturated by the fragrance of love."

Love is in the Air

Love is in the air everywhere I look around
Love is in the air every sight and every sound
And I don't know if I'm being foolish
Don't know if I'm being wise
But it's something that I must believe in
And it's there when I look in your eyes.

Love is in the air, in the whisper of the tree
Love is in the air in the thunder of the sea
And I don't know if I'm just dreaming
Don't know if I feel safe
But it's something that I must believe in
And it's there when you call out my name

Love is in the air
Love is in the air
Oh, oh, oh, oh, uh

Love is in the air, in the rising of the sun
Love is in the air, when the day is nearly done
And I don't know if you are illusion

Don't know if I see truth
But you are something that I must believe in
And you are there when I reach out for you

Love is in the air
Love is in the air
Oh, oh, oh, oh, uh

Oh, love is in the air
Love is in the air
Oh, oh, oh, oh, uh

John Paul Young