

Don't Sit This One Out

June 13, 2010

(Pentecost 3 – Year C)

Luke 7:36-8:3

St. Alban's Episcopal Church, Waco, Texas

Many years ago, long before I was ordained as a priest, our family of four were members of St. John the Divine Episcopal Church in Houston.

We went to church most every Sunday, bringing our two little boys with us.

We followed the liturgy, like any good Episcopalian, standing when you are supposed to stand, sitting when you are supposed to sit and kneeling when you are supposed to kneel.

It was the custom in that parish that the congregation would stand for the Prayers of the People, but then kneel down for the Confession. The cue for us to kneel down for the Confession was when the priest said:

“Let us confess our sins against God and our neighbor.”

Then the whole congregation would put their kneelers down and get on their knees.

But, a few times a year, when the priest would say:

“Let us confess our sins against God and our neighbor”

My wife, Susan, who many of you know to have a very independent mind, would not drop to her knees, but instead would just sit down in her pew.

I would glance over at her with a puzzled look and Susan, with a gleam in her eye, would whisper:

“I think I'll just sit this one out.”

Usually, Susan would play this little joke with me on occasions when she and I both knew that we had a lot that we needed to confess.

So, with my index finger, I would point down to the kneeler,

And with a feigned reluctance, she would get down on the kneeler as well, as our family would say together:

“Most merciful God, we confess that we have sinned against you, in thought, word and deed.”

In the reading that we hear today from Luke's Gospel, a woman is identified as a "sinner," most likely a prostitute.

This sinful woman interrupts a fancy dinner party that Jesus is attending at the home of Simon, the Pharisee.

This woman, this sinner, brings a jar of ointment with her and starts to rub on Jesus' feet.

Of course, this woman's actions cause quite a stir.

And Jesus says to Simon, the self-righteous Pharisee:

"I tell you, [Simon, this woman's] sins, which were many, have been forgiven;

Hence, she has shown great love."

Then Jesus turns to the woman and says:

"Your sins are forgiven."

You see, the self-righteous Pharisees, who were offended by the actions of the sinful woman, were not aware of their own sins.

Therefore, they experienced very little forgiveness and love.

Yet on the other hand, the sinful woman was very aware of her sins,

Therefore, she experienced a lot of forgiveness and love.

When we are more aware of our sins and shortcomings,

Then we are even more aware of the amazing ways that we have been loved and forgiven.

Our awareness of our own sins and of our own forgiveness is correlated to the amount of love and grace that we experience.

And our awareness of our own sins does not just stop with an awareness of our individual sins.

We also need to be aware of the corporate sins that we commit, the sins and offenses that we commit as a society and as a community.

Last Monday, I was in the airport in Newark, New Jersey, waiting for my flight back to DFW.

As I waited in the airport, CNN News was on the TV in the waiting area. The CNN news crew was covering the British Petroleum oil spill off the coast of Louisiana.

While people hustled and bustled through the corridors of the airport, I noticed that some people had stopped in their tracks to look at the

TV screens that showed coastal birds with oil coating and sticking to their wings.

I noticed that some people had tears in their eyes as they stared at marshes and wetlands that are covered in floating brown gunk.

As I watched the masses of people in the airport who were visibly moved by the images of environmental destruction, I believe that we were silently confessing our own corporate sin.

Through the tears in our eyes and through our corporate sorrow, we were aware that our own dependence on oil pollutes and destroys the creation that God made and called good.

It would be easy for me to look at the videos on CNN coming out of Louisiana and to blame British Petroleum or lax government regulations.

It would be easy for me to be like Simon the Pharisee and to blame “those people” as sinners.

It would be easy for me to hear the call for confession and to say: “I think I’ll just sit this one out.”

But the thing about corporate sin is that it implicates all of us as sinners.

Because as I watched CNN in the Newark Airport and I tried to blame “those people,” I suddenly realized that I was sipping bottled water out of a plastic water bottle, made from petroleum products.

I realized that I was waiting to get on an airplane that was filled with jet fuel that would release carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, continuing to harm God’s fragile earth, our island home.

While I was trying to blame British Petroleum or Barack Obama or “those people,” I realized that I am a sinner, too.

For when we hear:

“Let us confess our sins against God and our neighbor.”

We must not say:

“I think I’ll just sit this one out.”

But we must put down the kneelers and get on our knees.

Because when we do drop to our knees,

When we do come to Jesus in tears and with a bottle of ointment to anoint his feet,

When we are aware of our own sinfulness, as individuals and as a society,

Then we hear the voice of Jesus, boldly saying to us:

“Your sins are forgiven.”

For it has been my experience of the good news of Jesus Christ –
That those who are most aware of their own sins and shortcomings are
the same ones who most powerfully experience the forgiveness of
God.

For when we are aware that the sinners are not “those people,”
When we are aware that the beaches of the Gulf Coast are being ruined
because of our own thirst for cheap gasoline,
When we are aware that the Big 12 Conference is breaking up over our
own greed and lust for money,
When we are aware that a prostitute who rubs Jesus’ feet with ointment
is a treasured member of God’s family,
When we are aware that we have all sinned and fallen short of the glory
of God,
Then we powerfully experience that God forgives us – forgives us for
our self-righteousness, for our greed, our stupidity, our
shortcomings, our humanness.
And when I realize the height and breadth and depth of that forgiveness,
then I am driven to my knees, in thanks for God’s amazing grace
and love.

In a few minutes, at the end of the Prayers of the People, we will all
have an opportunity to confess our sins.

Do not sit this one out.

But drop to your knees and hear these words of amazing grace:

“Your sins are forgiven.”

AMEN.