

**11<sup>th</sup> Sunday, Year C, June 17, 2007**

**2 Samuel 12:7-10, 13 ; Galatians 2:16, 19-21; Luke 7:36-50**

**With God it is always “yes”— Forgiveness as Unconditional Love**

Our readings today all present us with stories of sinners and God’s forgiveness of their sins. In the first reading we hear how King David not only committed adultery with Bathsheba but went on to have her husband, Uriah, killed in battle so he could have her as his wife. It is hard to imagine a more despicable sin. The second reading tells us of Paul, who persecuted the early Christians and participated in Stephen’s martyrdom. Paul’s sin was persecuting the earliest Christians and explicitly rejecting the gospel. Pretty serious sins. The gospel story tells us of a “sinful woman” of the city, who was probably a prostitute. Like Simon the Pharisee we know that anyone engaged in that old profession is surely a sinner.

The stories of David, Paul, and the woman in the gospel thus seem to call us to recognize our sinfulness and guilt. They remind me of a discussion I had recently with a Jewish colleague at Boston College. He had been late for one of our meetings, apologized very strongly, and when I said there was no problem, he said, “oh well, it is just my Jewish guilt coming to the surface.” We then got into a discussion about whether Jews or Catholics have a stronger sense of being guilty. So I wonder do we identify being seriously religious with having a strong sense of

guilt? Having three readings on one Sunday, all about being sinful and guilty, seems to suggest this.

But it would be a serious mistake to hear today's readings as calls to feel more guilty. In fact they invite us to recognize that no matter what we have done, good or bad, God loves us unconditionally. There is a wonderful passage in St. Paul's second letter to the Corinthians that was read in the liturgy on Tuesday of this past week that can help us better understand today's scripture passages. Paul tells the Corinthians that God's relationship to them in Jesus Christ, is not "yes" and "no," but always "yes." God affirms and loves us, no matter what. Is this your image of God? When you think of God do you imagine someone like a stern school teacher who is always ready to say "no" to you? If so, it would not be surprising of being seriously religious means having a strong case of Jewish or Catholic guilt. Does the church present itself as an institution that always wants to say "no, no, no" to people as they seek to find their way along the confusing and often difficult paths of their lives?

If we think of God as a great "no" and if the church acts that way, this would be a serious distortion of the gospel. In Second Corinthians Paul tells us that in Christ, God's deepest word to us not mostly "no" but always "yes." God's love for us is unconditional. There are no ifs or maybes, but an unconditional yes that tells us God loves us no matter what.

Awareness of this led the sinful woman in today's gospel to her extravagant display of affection and gratitude to Jesus. She bathed his feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. She spread ointment and kisses on his feet. This was too much for the self-righteous Simon, who knew that sinful people like her should be kept at distance with a strong "no." But Jesus's approach is very different. She is loved unconditionally, despite her sinfulness. His word to her as a person is simply "yes." So what else can she do but express gratitude and affection. She has been loved much and forgiven much, so she loves much in return. God's word to her is not I will love you "maybe" or "if you shape up" but always "yes—I love you no matter what."

The readings today thus invite us not to Jewish or Catholic guilt, but to Jewish and Catholic gratitude. Since God's word of love to us is always "Yes," our response should always be "Thank you." Let us go together now to the table of thanksgiving to say that word of thanks together.

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