

Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by The Reverend Gail L. Miller, Pastor

June 13, 2010

Third Sunday after Pentecost

Luke 7: 36-50

Pentecost 3

Unforgiven/Gracious Living

A better title for the sermon this morning is: Gracious Living.

When we think of gracious living, my guess is that we imagine fine food and drink, beautiful art and architecture, well-mannered, pleasing companionship. We can probably learn a lot about this kind of gracious living in the pages of Martha Stewart's magazine.

We also might think of people who lived gracious lives. In these days / weeks since John Wooden died – longtime basketball coach at UCLA – he has been lifted up as one who exemplified gracious living.

But this morning I want to revive an old obsolete definition of *gracious* found in the Oxford English Dictionary:

Characterized by or endowed with Divine grace, godly, righteous, pious, regenerate

I like that! Gracious living from a Christian perspective is to live lives that reflect the grace of God. It is about allowing the Spirit of God to bring the goodness in us out into the open in our daily lives. Sounds simple – but in fact it can be a tall order. And sometimes it can even cost us. Usually what it costs us in our pride, but Jesus wants us to give that up anyway.

Our story in Luke about the judgmental Simon and the woman who loved Jesus is pretty straightforward. Simon is not being gracious, the woman is, and so Jesus tells a story to drive home the point.

And so I'd like to do the same today – tell a couple stories that make the point.

First story:

Edward Tuckerman, Jr. was a baker. He was born in 1740 and spent 50 years as a baker in Boston's south end, taking just a bit of time out to be a second lieutenant in Boston during the American Revolution. What set Mr. Tuckerman apart as a baker, however, was not his longevity in the business, but the fact that he discovered how to keep biscuits fresh on long ocean voyages.

That discovery meant that his business grew by leaps and bounds, and soon he had over 300 employees and was serving all the ports of New England. He had many notable accomplishments, was a founder of several charitable societies and was even a state senator, but I'm telling his story today because of what Edward Tuckerman, Jr. did every New Year's morning.

If you owed Mr. Tuckerman money as the books were closed out for the preceding year, you got a call from Mr. Tuckerman. If any delinquent borrower, whether an individual or a business, could show that they did not have the ability to pay, Mr. Tuckerman forgave the debt. Large,

small, didn't matter--every dime was forgiven. Not put on a payment plan, not deferred, forgiven. Debtors prisons would not be abolished until the middle of the 19th century, but Mr. Tuckerman took a higher road, perhaps because he followed a higher law.

Edward Tuckerman was an Episcopalian, active in Trinity Church in Boston as was his father before him. He would have known the Lord's Prayer since childhood. As a baker, I have to wonder how often he thought of "Give us this day our daily bread" in relation to his business, and of course the very next line is "forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors."

While many churches, substitute "trespasses" or "sins" for "debts," the word in Greek is an economic term. As hard as it is to forgive sins, I think there are more who are willing to forgive sins than there are willing to forgive debt. Not so with Mr. Tuckerman, and if it had a negative impact on his business, it was not enough to impact his ability to give generously to his church, the Massachusetts Bible Society, and other charitable causes.

Edward Tuckerman was able to forgive all his debtors every New Year's Day for two reasons. The first I suspect is because he was not deeply in debt himself. He did not need to collect the debts of others to pay off his own debts.

The second reason he was able to forgive debts, however, is because he knew that neither the bread he made nor the money that came as a result really belonged to him. He was a steward of God's resources, and he knew that the opportunities and inspiration that made him a successful businessman were God's gifts to him.

God gifted him so that he might in turn pass God's gifts along to others. So for 50 years, Edward Tuckerman, made the daily bread upon which people depended. And when they could not pay, it became a gift. He did not just pray the Lord's Prayer, he lived it.

Edward Tuckerman, Jr. died in 1818 and his obituary called him "one of Boston's most worthy, useful, and respectable citizens." I'm sure he had his flaws and, like all of us, I'm sure his life knew sin as well as the good. But I'm also sure that when he met God face to face, it was all forgiven, even as he had forgiven others.

Second story:

Tony Campolo, Christian author, professor and pastor, tells the story of speaking at a conference in Hawaii. He arrived in the evening, checked into his hotel and tried to get some sleep. Unfortunately his internal clock woke him at 3:00 a.m. The night was dark, the streets were silent, the world was asleep, but Tony was wide awake and his stomach was growling.

So he got up and went out to look for a place to get an early breakfast. Well everything was closed except for a grungy dive in an alley. So he went on in. He quickly learned that this place, in the wee small hours, was regularly frequented by prostitutes who came by at the conclusion of their night's work.

One, on this particular night, mentioned that tomorrow would be her 39th birthday and that in her entire life she had never had a birthday party. When the ladies left, Tony asked the man behind the counter about what they had just witnessed.

The man confirmed that they were all regulars including the birthday girl, Agnes. Well, Tony wondered about the possibility of throwing a birthday party for her the next night. So they did.

At 2:30 the next morning, Tony was back. He had crepe paper and other decorations and a sign made of big pieces of cardboard that said, “Happy Birthday, Agnes!” The bartender had prepared a cake and gotten the word out on the streets about the party so the place was jammed wall-to-wall with hookers.

At 3:30 on the dot, the door swung open and in walked Agnes. Everybody was ready – they all shouted and screamed, “Happy Birthday, Agnes!” Well, needless to say, she was blown away. She was stunned, her mouth fell open, her knees started to buckle, and she almost fell over. Wow!

Once things settled down, Tony got up on a chair and said, “How about we pray together?” There in a hole-in-the-wall greasy spoon in the middle of the night with half of the prostitutes in Honolulu listening, he prayed for Agnes, “that her life would be changed, and that God would be good to her.”

When he was finished, the man behind the counter leaned over, and with a trace of hostility in his voice said, “Hey, you never told me you were a preacher. What kind of church do you belong to anyway?”

And in one of those moments when just the right words come, Tony answered him quietly, “I belong to a church that throws birthday parties for prostitutes at 3:30 in the morning.”

The man thought for a moment and said, “No you don’t. There ain’t no church like that. If there was, I’d join it. Yep, I’d join a church like that.”

Are we a church like that? I’d like to think so. If we’re honest though, we’ll admit that we sometimes do put up barriers to gracious living or as our denomination likes to say, “radical hospitality and an extravagant welcome.”

We can be terribly judgmental and self-righteous as humans; and as Christians (and the church) those qualities are not very becoming of us. Contrary to what far too many people think, both within and outside the church, the church is NOT in the morality business. The church is in the grace and forgiveness business.

Sometimes when reading Bible stories, we ask the question – who do you identify most with in this story? Sometimes we have a quick association with a certain character or occurrence.

This morning – this story. With whom do you identify? Really, honestly?
Do you harbor some of the judgmentalism of Simon?
Do you feel the shame of discovering that your priorities are in the wrong place?
Do you, like the woman, love Jesus so much that pour your heart out to him?
Do you feel the heavy weight of sin?
Do you crave the release forgiveness?

Truthfully – I would answer yes, sometimes, to all of these.
And I would hope you do too.

So today – let’s allow Jesus to expose a bit of our dark side; AND free us from it at the same time.

We are guilty, yes; but we are forgiven – forgiven.

If we can embrace both of these – and they are hard to embrace, sometimes especially the forgiveness – still, embracing them both and keeping before us role models like Edward Tuckerman and Tony Campolo – we are well on our way to gracious living.

Amen.