

Sine Domino Frustra Laboramus

3rd Sunday after Pentecost
June 13 2010
Glendale Lutheran Church

TEARS THAT CLEANSE THE SOUL
2 Samuel 11:26-12:10; 13-14 / Luke 7:36-8:3

I.

The reason for the Old Testament reading and the Gospel so closely together in our liturgy is obvious: both are about heartfelt repentance and holy forgiveness.

The reading from 2 Samuel is touching and ever so contemporary: about the rich man, who had a whole flock of sheep, and the poor man, who had one little ewe lamb whom he dearly loved. When the rich man had a guest, he took that one little lamb and had it killed for dinner. “Outrage!” screamed the mighty King David. Then Nathan confronted him with the truth that would seep into the depth of David’s soul – YOU ARE THE MAN! You had another man killed, then took his wife to be your own, and from that unholy union a child was conceived. King David owned up to his sin and, shamed, repented of it, no doubt on his knees or with his face buried in his blood-soaked hands. And Nathan absolved him, saying, “The Lord has taken away your sin. You are not going to die.” No sin is too heinous, no sin is beyond the scope of God’s prevailing forgiveness. Oh, for sure, like David, we are made to suffer the human consequences of a particular sin or exercising worse than poor judgment, but never are we made to endure life outside the realm of God’s immeasurable grace. David didn’t have to die,

but the child did – can you imagine the tears that flowed from David’s heart throughout that time.

II.

Heartfelt repentance and holy forgiveness. King David experienced that in spades. As for certain Pharisees in Luke’s Gospel, that’s another story. Jesus was a guest at a dinner party hosted by a certain Pharisee named Simon. Suddenly, uninvited and unwelcome, a woman burst into the room, knelt before Jesus, and began to cry at his feet. Her tears flowed freely, tears that cleansed her soul, and soon Jesus’ feet were thoroughly soaked. The woman loosened her hair (God forbid!) and used it to dry her feet. The Pharisee couldn’t believe his eyes. He could not understand how a Master Teacher like Jesus could allow such a woman to touch him, let alone dry his feet with her hair. Luke does not specify the nature of this woman’s sin, but it is obvious that she was an outcast in the eyes of Simon and his thoroughly ostentatious friends.

In the face of all the questions about this woman’s character and about Jesus’ involvement with her, he spoke the parable about the debtors, one of whom owned a great deal of money and the other far less. When neither could repay the debt, both were forgiven. “Which one would love more?” asked Jesus. Duh! Obviously, the one whose debt was larger, they rightly joined. Precisely, said Jesus, who then offered these incredibly profound words, “Her many sins have been forgiven, for she loved much. But he who has been forgiven little, loves little... Woman, your sins are forgiven... Your faith has saved you; go in peace.” You see, the reason a person is forgiven little is because that person doesn’t think he or she needs a lot of forgiveness, if any. Have you ever told a person that you’re sorry when you really weren’t? You said that you’re “sorry” either to clear the air a bit or,

even better, to have that person share in the blame. Instead of that, when you said that you're sorry for all the wrong reasons and then that person says, flatly, "I forgive you!" and doesn't at all share in the blame when you wished that he had... well, that makes you really self-righteous! Have you ever been there? I have, probably more than once, but one time nearly forty years ago, when I was a really rookie pastor, and I'll never forget the lesson I learned.

That said, now let's set the matter straight. This text is intended to explain not why the woman was forgiven but why she was capable of such love. Let me repeat that for emphasis! Her unabashed weeping was an expression of heartfelt repentance, to be sure, of soul-searching, painful admission of her guilt before society and before God Almighty (which would be refreshing to hear a lot more often these days from powers-that-be, I say and sound like one of those Pharisees), but they were also tears of gratitude, tears of love. She had heard enough of Jesus' teaching, and seen enough of his reaching out to the downtrodden and rejected to know the depth of Jesus' love for her. She did not come to Jesus in order to be forgiven, but to rejoice in the faith that Jesus would receive her and in the knowledge that she would hear words of forgiveness, which she did, and so Jesus' words to her were but a truth which she had already come to believe.

In other words, penitence that precedes forgiveness and love and gratitude that follow forgiveness are not so sequential as they might seem. Actually, penitence and love are inseparable most of the time. As one author says, "Penitence always has love in it and love always contains a continuing penitence." Say what?

IV.

Why do we approach the throne of God daily to confess our sins? Is it a requisite to God's forgiveness? Did God wait to send his Son to die for the sins of the world until the world was sufficiently repentant? Were that the case, the cross would still be ahead of us and probably wouldn't ever come. Rather, "God so loved the world that he sent his only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." God's forgiveness has no requisite except the cross of Jesus. There is nothing – nothing! – we can do to effect God's forgiveness upon us; not even offer the sincerest confession of sins. You see, if there were, then, depending on the seriousness of our sin, there might always be that lingering doubt in our minds whether or not God's grace upon us has run out, as so often happens within our own human relationships. (And there is such a thing as grace and love 'running out' when one person has been hurt often enough and deep enough.) Not so with our Lord.

Rather, we come to God with tears of repentance – tears that cleanse our souls – because we know that God loves us, unequivocally. Like the woman, we know with all the certainty in the world – Spirit-given, of course, in faith – that God will not turn his back on us, that God will reject our pleas for mercy. We come to God with tears of repentance because we know how deeply we have brought offense and sorrow upon that God who loves us, nothing more, nothing less.

Put into your mind and heart one single person whom you love more than anyone else on this earth – spouse, child, grandchild, dear friend. If you have hurt that person with words or actions you sincerely wish you could take back but can't, and you are so very sorry – more than anything else, you are sorry because you have brought hurt to the one you so treasure. I come to that person, then with tears of repentance and with a contrite heart, not in the

hope that she or he will love me; rather, because you know that love between you is real, and you know that it is shared. By the way, if you have need to do just that, then do it sooner rather than later.

Ponder that possibility and that spirit within other family relationships, even within our own church family. Our tears of repentance are absolutely necessary, not in order to gain forgiveness, but to give expression to the love of Christ that has bound us together.

V.

So, then, were those free-flowing tears which cleansed the soul of that ‘sinful’ woman tears of repentance or tears of love? Yes, from both eyes of faith. Is that not why King David could write these inspired words which became Psalm 51, “Have mercy on me, O God, ACCORDING TO YOUR UNFAILING LOVE, ACCORDING TO YOUR GREAT COMPASSION, blot out all my transgressions.”

It’s all over Scripture: heartfelt repentance and holy forgiveness, and not necessarily in that order.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.