

Pentecost 3C

June 13, 2010

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*The rules of the game have been changed*

I just love playing games. Card games, board games-you name it, I'll play it. I'm known to be quite a competitive and intense player. And I don't like to lose. Just ask those who played Apples to Apples with me at this year's Women's retreat and they'll tell you exactly how intense I can get! I recall a time when Daniel and I were playing Scrabble with another couple. I was winning the game and I must admit I was gloating a little. At some point, they got tired of my gloating and all together the three of them decided to gang up on me. Looking back now I realize I deserved it. One of them put a word on the game board that none of us were certain was actually a word. We looked it up in our dictionary and couldn't find it. The three decided that we should allow the word. I vehemently protested! "That's not how we play the game," I said. You all are changing the rules halfway through the game. You can't do that!" But they stood their ground together and wouldn't back down. I was furious. I was so furious that I took the board and threw it on the ground - all the tiles flying through the air. The game was now over. Needless to say, it was not one of my better moments.

In our Gospel story this morning, Simon the Pharisee was furious at Jesus who had suddenly changed all the rules of the game. Remember, Pharisees were great at following the rules. They lived and breathed the rules. It must not only have been frustrating, but disturbing to Simon and his fellow Pharisees to see

this Rabbi change things on them without any hesitation. I can hear the echo of my own words coming from Simon's lips, "You can't do that!" It is as if he is saying to Jesus, "How dare you allow this woman of the city, a sinner, to get so close! How dare she enter into my respectable home!" How dare she receive forgiveness and mercy!" Not only in this incident, but throughout his ministry, Jesus creates an ever-widening circle, welcoming those beyond the circle to join him, those whom the Pharisees and other righteous folk would have never allowed in. In Jesus, God gets rid of all the old rules and categories and draws new boundary lines.

Saint Paul speaks to this very idea in his words to the Galatians. As Christianity spread beyond the borders of Jerusalem, more and more converts were Gentiles. And so one of the first disagreements in the Church was over whether or not it was necessary for these Gentiles to follow Mosaic Law in order to be accepted into the community. At its essence the question they were struggling with was, "Could Jewish Christians sit down at a table and eat with Gentile Christians?" Paul addresses this controversy by passionately arguing not only to the Galatians, but to Peter and the other leaders of the Church that the Gospel message is an inclusive one. He claims that we are brought into right relationship with God by divine grace and not by obedience to the law. God's grace is not dependent upon our observance of the law. Therefore, anyone, Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female can participate fully in the life of the community. Paul's answer to the question is a resounding, YES! Yes, Jewish Christians can and should sit down and eat with Gentile Christians because in Jesus, God has eliminated all the old rules and categories.

The most important part of Luke's account today, I believe, is the question Jesus puts to the Pharisee. "Simon," he says, "do you see this woman?" It is as if he saying, Simon, can you look past your own assumptions, your own prejudices and even your own beliefs and see this child of God standing before you? Can you put aside all those rules just for one moment and allow God's grace not only to enter in this woman's life, but in your own? Don't let your tunnel vision hinder you from seeing that it's through God's gracious love that both of you have been made worthy!

There is a part in me and I suspect in all of us that can relate to the woman with the alabaster jar, knowing what it feels like to stand in need of forgiveness, so grateful when that unexpected grace is showered upon us. However, I believe there is a part in each of us that can also readily relate to Simon. We don't like to admit it, but we are just as uncomfortable with this woman and her reckless act of devotion and gratitude as Simon was. We stand before her judging and categorizing her, while at the same time justifying ourselves and our preconceived notions. She's the sinner, not me! She's the one outside of the circle and I'm not going to allow her in.

Thursday I attended Maggie's preschool end of the year program. As part of the program they had put together a slideshow of the year. It struck me as I watched the slideshow of those precious children from all faith traditions and ethnic backgrounds that the assumptions, categories and prejudices we create are learned behavior. Those preschoolers did not look upon each other with suspicion or mistrust. No one was outside of the circle. All were welcome. Too often, as we grow older we learn to mistrust one another, to be hindered by our

tunnel vision too easily look past those on the margins and not invite them into our circle.

The good news for us this day is that Jesus comes among us to break down the barriers we have constructed. Jesus pushes us to widen that circle, making it even bigger than the circles we created when we were young children. The good news is that God has changed the rules of the game in Jesus. All of us sinners are invited to the feast. All of us are welcome to the table and included in the circle. May we have the courage to accept that invitation for others as well as for ourselves. And may we allow God's grace to enter into our lives and be changed by it. Amen.