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Love as Consequence of Authentic Forgiveness

Biblical Reflection for 11th Sunday in Ordinary Time C

By Father Thomas Rosica, CSB

TORONTO, JUNE 8, 2010 ([Zenit.org](http://zenit.org)).- Throughout the Gospels, Jesus dines with sinners and takes the opportunity to teach some very important lessons about discipleship and holiness.

As with so many things he did, Jesus' befriending such types of people and eating with them angered his opponents, especially the religious leaders of his day. They murmured against him: "He has gone in to be a guest of a man who is a sinner," or "Look at him who eats with tax-collectors and prostitutes!" But where others saw only sinners, people on the fringe, public pariahs to be hated and isolated, Jesus saw human beings cowering in the shadows, often trapped in their own failure, desperately trying to be something better, awkwardly trying to make amends for a life of injustice.

It was so often at meals that Jesus seemed to show most clearly that he reconciled sinners. How can we not recall the stories of Zacchaeus, Levi, the woman who washed Jesus' feet with her tears, the disillusioned disciples at Emmaus, and Peter at the lakeside? Even the Last Supper, which we think of instinctively as a very sublime occasion, was a meal shared with sinners. Jesus' table includes Judas (his betrayer), Peter (who denied him), and the squabbling and obtuse disciples. The early Church founded its understanding of the Eucharist on the basis of the dangerous memory of Jesus' table fellowship.

The woman party crasher

In today's Gospel story of the pardoning of the sinful woman (7:36-50), a Pharisee, suspecting Jesus to be a prophet, invites Jesus to a festive banquet in his house, but the Pharisee's self-righteousness leads to little forgiveness by God and consequently little love shown toward Jesus. The sinful woman, on the other hand, manifests a faith in God that has led her to seek forgiveness for her sins, and because so much was forgiven, she now overwhelms Jesus with her display of love. The whole episode is a powerful lesson on the relation between forgiveness and love.

Why did this nameless woman approach Jesus and anoint him at the risk of ridicule and abuse by others? Her action was motivated by one thing: her love for Jesus and her gratitude for his forgiveness. She did something a Jewish woman would never do in public: She loosed her hair and anointed Jesus with her tears. She also did something that only love can do: She took the most precious thing she had and spent it all on Jesus. Her love was not calculated but lavish and extravagant.

Jesus recounts what he saw the woman do (vv 44-46). The purpose of this recitation is not so much to accuse Simon for what he did not do. Does Simon persist in seeing the woman as a sinner, or is he able to reinterpret her actions? If Simon is still not able to come up with a different evaluation of what he saw, Jesus tries to persuade Simon to see as he sees: She has been forgiven much and now shows great love (vv 47-48). This woman is not forgiven because of her lavish demonstrations of love; rather, the loving actions follow

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from her experience of having been forgiven. Verse 47 sums it up beautifully: "Her many sins have been forgiven; hence, she has shown great love" (literally, "her many sins have been forgiven, seeing that she has loved much.") Her love is the consequence of her forgiveness. This is also the meaning demanded by the parable in Luke 7:41-43.

Love covers a multitude of sins

Is our love extravagant or miserly? Jesus makes clear that great love springs from a heart forgiven and cleansed. "Love covers a multitude of sins" (1 Peter 4:8), "for love is of God" (1 John 4:7). The woman's lavish expression of love was proof that she had found favor with God. The stark contrast of attitudes between Simon and the woman of ill repute, demonstrate how we can either accept or reject God's mercy. Simon, who regarded himself as an upright Pharisee, felt no need for love or mercy. His self-sufficiency kept him from acknowledging his need for God's grace.

The sinful woman exemplifies one who responds properly to Jesus, and whose actions mirror his own. The key question her story poses, not only to Simon, but to us is, "Do you see this woman?" Not to see the woman and her actions properly is not to perceive Jesus and his identity correctly. The story is open-ended: there is yet hope that Simon's perception, understanding and vision can be corrected. What about ours?

Christian reconciliation

Today's Gospel invites us to reflect on the mystery and obligation of forgiveness and reconciliation in our Christian tradition. There is a widespread misunderstanding that in any conflict a Christian should be a peacemaker who avoids taking sides and tries to bring about a reconciliation between the opposing forces. This makes reconciliation an absolute principle that must be applied in all cases of conflict. In some conflicts one side is right and the other side is wrong, one side is being unjust and oppressive and the other is suggesting injustice and oppression. As Christians, we are never asked to reconcile good and evil, justice and injustice. Rather we are to do away with evil, injustice and sin.

Second, neutrality is not always possible, and in cases of conflict due to injustice and oppression neutrality is totally impossible. If we do not take sides with the oppressed, then we end up taking sides with the oppressor. "Bringing the two sides together" in such cases can end up being beneficial to the oppressor, because it enables the status quo to be maintained; it hides the true nature of the conflict, keeps the oppressed quiet and passive and it brings about a kind of false reconciliation without justice. The injustice continues and everybody is made to feel that the injustice does not matter because the tension and conflict have been reduced.

Third is the commonly held view that Christians should always seek a "middle way" in every dispute. Those who are afraid of conflict or confrontation, even when it is nonviolent, are usually convinced of the need for change. Their caution hides an un-Christian pessimism about the future, a lack of authentic, Christian hope. Or they use the Christian concern for reconciliation to justify a form of escapism from the realities of injustice and conflict.

Forgiveness in the sexual abuse crisis

This topic was addressed in a very timely manner regarding the sexual abuse crisis or pandemic that has touched the Church very deeply. The entire world has heard about the sins and failings of pastoral leaders over the past months. I draw your attention to the recent, excellent pastoral letter of Archbishop Mark Coleridge, of the Diocese of Canberra and Goulburn in Australia. In his Pentecost 2010 letter on Sexual Abuse of the Young in the Catholic Church, entitled "Seeing the Faces, Hearing the Voices," Archbishop Coleridge writes:

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"Another factor was the Catholic Church's culture of forgiveness which tends to view things in terms of sin and forgiveness rather than crime and punishment. But in the case of clerical abuse of the young, we are dealing with crime, and the Church has struggled to find the point of convergence between sin and forgiveness on the one hand and crime and punishment on the other.

"True, sin must be forgiven, but so too must crime be punished. Both mercy and justice must run their course, and do so in a way that converges. This relates to larger questions of how the Church sees her relationship with society more generally. We are "in the world but not of it": but what precisely does that mean in the here and now? There is also the large question of the relationship between divine and human judgment. The Church insists that it is to God, not to human beings, that final judgment belongs.

"Yet how does that fit with the need for human judgment when we move within the logic of crime and punishment? We have been slow and clumsy, even at times culpable, in shaping our answer to such questions."

Such mistakes about Christian reconciliation are not simply a matter of misunderstandings, but come from a lack of real love and compassion for those who are suffering or who have been victimized, or from a lack of appreciation of what is really happening in serious conflicts. The pursuit of an illusory neutrality in every conflict is ultimately a way of siding with the oppressor. This is not the reconciliation and forgiveness that Jesus taught through his life and ministry.

In the conflict between Pharisees and the so-called "sinners," Jesus sided with the sinners, prostitutes and tax collectors against the Pharisees. And in the conflict between the rich and the poor, he sided with the poor. Jesus condemns the Pharisees and the rich in no uncertain terms, and he forgives the sinners and blesses the poor. Jesus makes no attempt to compromise with the authorities for the sake of a false peace of reconciliation or unity. The reconciliation, peace and forgiveness that God wants are based on truth, justice and love.

[The readings for 11th Sunday of Ordinary Time 2 Samuel 12:7-10, 13; Galatians 2:16, 19-21; Luke 7:36-8:3 or 7:36-50]

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