

Luke 7:36-50
June 12, 2016

“the Spiritual Perspective”

Rev. William G. Utke
Emanuel UCC, HC

Two weeks ago I attended a graduation ceremony during which my 22 year old Niece received her General Education Development certificate, or GED. Some people think of the GED as a second rate education but that stereotype was challenged by this ceremony. Even though my father was the speaker at my HS graduation and I was the speaker at my younger brother's HS graduation, and I have attended numerous other graduations... I can say this GED ceremony was far and away the most meaningful of them all. Why? Because each GED student had a powerful story about why their life did not fit into the mold of a traditional HS education.

A Muslim woman who emigrated from Gambia told of the barrier of language which prevented her from a traditional HS education. A Mexican Man told of his family's need for him to work at age 17 so they had food on their table. An African American woman told of how she was excelling in HS until she became struck by a horrible illness and had to drop out. A young woman told of her Father's death during her HS years and being someone whose emotions tended to be fragile, this was too much to overcome. A man told of skipping HS to care for an ill family member when no one else could.

These students had to overcome extremely difficult obstacles, obstacles that would have caused many to give up. While there will always be some who don't respect a GED as much as a HS diploma let me suggest I think they need a perspective change.

The GED has given these graduates the confidence that they can overcome tremendous obstacles. They know they can climb larger hills than they previously thought. This empowers each student to overcome tremendous challenges they will face in the future.

Today in Luke's gospel Jesus is invited to the home of a wealthy Pharisee, named Simon. Most of us have come to believe that Jesus was at odds with all the Pharisees but upon closer look at the gospel accounts we see that is an unfair generalization. Jesus was at odds with the Pharisees who were corrupt and self-serving -- not all of them.

So Jesus goes to dine in the home of Simon. We can imagine a home filled with fine furniture, great art, priceless rugs, and of course... many servants. While he is there a woman comes to the door, a woman who has seen and experienced many horrible things. She is crying and her tears fall on Jesus' feet, she kisses his feet dry. She brings wonderful perfume and anoints Jesus. Before she even says a word in this story this woman has performed ancient customs of hospitality. These acts were as customary as when we offer a guest in our home something to eat and drink.

In this story Jesus is teaching us to see with the eyes and heart and mind of God. To understand how God's love overturns existing, accepted conditions.

Simon has allowed his cultural setting to shape his view of this woman, he sees her as a sinner. We hear his inner dialogue overflowing with judgement as he questions Jesus' actions saying, "How could a TRUE prophet allow a woman like this to touch him." His judgement reinforces oppressive societal stereotypes of women and reveals how little he truly understands about Jesus and his love.

Next, Jesus tells a parable revealing how he sees this woman. The parable is about two debtors who owe different amounts, one a large sum and one very little... and he turns this parable into a lesson inviting us to see this woman as deeply grateful for a fresh start with her hospitality being a thankful response for God's forgiveness.

Turning our expectations upside down is what God's love does. We already know this if we think about it. Our savior tweets throughout the New Testament, little messages that are outright offensive to our culturally conditioned sensibilities ...Love your enemy. Go the extra mile. Turn the other cheek. Blessed are the meek, blessed are the poor, blessed are the hungry, blessed are the peacemakers, blessed are those who claim faith in the face of fear and conformity.

Jesus sees this woman through the eyes of God's radical, death-conquering, life-giving love. And he wants us to see her, and each other that way too. That is the love he taught. That is the love he was willing to die hoping to reveal. That is the love powering his resurrection and every gift of new life.

God's love shapes our perspective. We can look at a class of GED graduates, or those who come to the Gathering and Guest house, and wonder what is wrong with them. Wonder why they think they have it so much worse than others. We can wonder why they couldn't just do it the way everyone else does it, why don't they fit into the mold, why do we have to make special provisions for them.

We can question the person who wears a "#blacklivesmatters" button, or a T-Shirt that says, "Every worker deserves a living wage." We can say, "That isn't how it works, don't all lives matter, doesn't God love everyone the same, can't low wage workers just get a better job, can't they fit the mold?" In the parable of the two debtors Jesus is saying those who fall outside the expectations, those who fall between the cracks in our social safeguards, and those who don't fit the mold need more love. Or another way to say this might be to suggest people who don't fit the mold, who fall between the cracks, are more prepared to receive and share God's love.

Jesus speaks to the Pharisee who thought he had lived his life so righteously and tells about this woman everyone is sitting in judgement of...

"Do you see this woman? I came to your home; you provided no water for my feet, but she rained tears on my feet and dried them with her hair. You gave me no greeting, but from the time I arrived she hasn't quit kissing my feet. You provided nothing for freshening up, but she

has soothed my feet with perfume. Impressive, isn't it? She was forgiven many, many sins, and so she is very, very grateful. If the forgiveness is minimal, the gratitude is minimal."

I close with a poem that captures a faithful response to Jesus today. "I didn't see her. I was blind. I saw her only as a problem to be solved. I didn't see the treasure. I didn't see the love. Your question was what I needed: "Do you see this person?"

The answer was obvious. She is precious, valued, loved, and loving. Grant me eyes to see the way you see. Help me to see others through your eyes of love."

Amen