



June 13, 2010
Third Sunday after Pentecost

*The Sinner's Song**
Rev. James Lamkin

Psalm 5:1-8; Galatians 2:18-21; Luke 7:36-8:3

The Bible is a library of primal images—primal images taken, not from the periphery of life or superfluous encounters of life, but from the primary relationships that comprise the combustion engine of human life. Relationship with God, with ourselves, with one another, and with God's world.

Primal images. Like a father's broken heart over a missing prodigal son from whom he is cut-off physically, and an elder son from whom he is cut-off emotionally.

The Bible is a library of primal images: two women, Hagar and Sarah, whose maternal jealousy finds its way into their sons, Isaac and Ishmael, and into their religious descendants to this day of Judaism and Islam.

Primal images: the suffering Son of God who from the cross quotes scriptures that questions God's forsakenness.

Primal images, like this one today. What starts as a stuffy, dinner gathering, suddenly turns as a woman "of the city," doesn't simply enter the room, but is propelled, almost hurled like an ocean's wave pushes a sea shell onto the shore. Almost like her being there is not optional; but like her life depended on it.

She has no name. she only has a label. "A sinner."

Each time I've read this text, I've heard a song in my head. It is a Sacred Harp song. It sounds like this....

Instrumental stanza of "Come Ye Sinners, Poor and Needy"

I said the Bible is primal. To my ear, Sacred Harp music is too. Perhaps having its origins in the hills of the Scotch/Irish, then finding a foothold in the hills and hollers of Appalachia, it bears a deep,

percussion-like sound that shakes its singers...almost like it comes from quaking places, primal places within us.

Sacred Harp songs are low fat and no sugar. They are about death, burial, burden, and yearning. "Praise songs" they are not.

Our scars, our wounds, our earthiness, our humanness is not air-brushed. The tunes and text bear the freight of the human condition...

But also the relief of redemption; God's grace that is the echoed response to our heart's yearning.

It might well be the theme song of the woman who stumbles into the dinner party like it was a trauma center, near death from the fatal wounds of life. She is weak and wounded. She is sick and sore.

Her song sounds like this.

As the choir sings the first stanza, we will listen...

*Come, ye sinners, poor and needy,
Weak and wounded, sick and sore;
Jesus ready stands to save you,
Full of pity, love and power.*

*I will arise and go to Jesus.
He will embrace me in his arms.
In the arms of my dear savior,
Oh there are ten thousand charms.*

So what compelled her, propelled her to come to Jesus?

What's the back story? We don't know. Then again, we never know. Almost always, the Bible hides the back stories...so that we might fill-in our own.

Nicodemus a graying theologian whose longing eyes flickered in the campfire light. But why did he come?

Zachaeus was a wee little man, and a wee little man was he. Who climbed up in the sycamore tree for the lord he wanted to see. But no matter how many times you read the scripture or sing the song, you never get to the motive.

We don't know, we never know.

Nor do we fully know our own. What truly compels us, propels us? We are mysteries to our own selves.

We are almost envious of her abandonment of impression-management, her compulsion to risk further embarrassment because she cannot bear her self or her sins one more day. And she is drawn to this one who embodies grace and hope.

Dante Allegeri's first line of *La Commedia* is, "In the middle of the road of my life, I awoke in the dark wood, where the true way was wholly lost." A generation later, Boccaccio called it *Divina*. It is divine because it is real. A real struggle of the soul.

What compelled her? Maybe, "In the middle of the road of my life, I awoke in the dark wood, where the true way was wholly lost."

Thoreau's *Walden* names that haunting line: "The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation."

What compelled her? Maybe, her life of quiet or loud desperation had reached an unbearable pitch.

The Sacred Harp hymn we are singing was written by Joseph Hart. He was compelled to write the hymn in 1757 because of his conversion at a George Whitfield crusade.

The woman is labeled "A sinner." It is perhaps descriptive of her life, maybe life-style, but mainly it was prescriptive. Her life had fallen short—the etymology of the word *sin*—fallen short of the Pharisee's, religious establishment's categories of who is obedient to the law of God and who is not.

She was not. She was a sinner. She had fallen short.
Let's sing together the second stanza.

*Come, ye thirsty, come, and welcome,
God's free bounty glorify;
True belief and true repentance,
Every grace that brings you nigh.
I will arise and go to Jesus.
He will embrace me in his arms.
In the arms of my dear savior,
Oh there are ten thousand charms.*

Interesting isn't it, of all the words in the Bible, she is not given one of them. We never hear her voice; and yet she speaks, not in lines, but in lament through her tears.

Tears are prayers that have not found words.

As we debriefed our inter-faith pilgrimage, sitting in a circle in Istanbul, one of the African-American, Muslim, young men said, "One of my take-aways from the pilgrimage is what James said in the sermon at Ephesus, 'Tears are prayers that have not yet found words.' And as I think about my life, and the death of my father, I cry a lot."

Camus, said "live to the point of tears." And this woman does that.

The dinner party would not have sat at a table as we do. They would have been on couches, reclining, maybe leaning on elbows. Maybe like spokes in a wheel, stretching out from the food at the center. Their feet at the outer edge.

And this woman comes to Jesus, and without a word, weeps and washes his feet with her tears and wipes his feet with her hair. Even at a distance it is painfully public and remarkably intimate.

Whatever oil she carried in the alabaster jar, it was the lotion of lament.

One of the gifts that the Judeo-Christian traditions give the world, is the know-how of lament. Before finger pointing and blaming and judging, that the primal gift that we can give is permission to lament.

It would be hard to televise that. But it would be good. Name the leading laments of the newspaper's headlines:

The spewing oil along the Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Florida, coastlines. Oh! The bullets and bombs that take life daily in Afghanistan. Oh! The flash floods that kills dozens in Arkansas. Oh! The grief of ancient angst between Palestine and Israel. Oh! The old wound of racism that will ever haunt the land of the free and the home of the brave.

The first step toward healing is lament.

Two-thirds of the psalms are laments. They get the percentage of life right.

Psalm 5 begins with "hear my sighing." And we hear. We hear the woman's sighing and through it her shipwrecked soul crashes the party and breaks apart at the feet of Jesus.

But the story doesn't end in disaster.

Let's sing the third stanza...

*Come, ye weary, heavy laden,
Lost and ruined by the fall;
If you tarry till you're better,
You will never come at all.
I will arise and go to Jesus.
He will embrace me in his arms.
In the arms of my dear savior,
Oh there are ten thousand charms.*

I remember the day my Clinical Pastoral Education Supervisor, Joe Gross, said to me, “I believe there is nothing I can do to make God love me more, and nothing I can do to make God love me less.” Since it is more my bent to try to earn salvation, this was completely angular to how I lived...but completely necessary to who I was. And I think Joe found this truth among some of John Claypool’s insights.

The woman’s weeping was her confession. And it was met by the judgment of Simon the Pharisee.

Her confession is met by Jesus proclamation of forgiveness.

That is what the story is really about. Simon is a walk-on character. The anonymous woman makes a cameo appearance. But the story is a stage dramatizing that Jesus, sent from God, has the authority to declare the forgiveness of sins.

It is a scandalous, blasphemous, redemptive act.

But Jesus doesn’t savor the power...in fact, he claims that he is not the predicate. She is. “Your faith has saved you,” says he, “Go in the shalom of God.”

She enters lost, but miracle of miracles, by finding Jesus, she finds herself. And through her lament, and through Jesus announcement, she finds forgiveness, and her own faith that has saved her. Whew!

“In the middle of the road of my life, I awoke in the dark wood, where the true way was wholly lost.”

But it is also true like Rebecca Solnit, in *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*, says, “It is only the sinner, the imperfect, the incompletely transformed, who comes back bearing tales.”

Like this woman, I find myself in the gravitational pull of Jesus. and feel the relief that God’s grace is large enough to enclose my life, broken parts and all.

Let’s close with the final stanza, relying not on faithfulness, nor on our fitness. Just the need for and yearning for God’s grace.

Let us sing with passion...

*Let not conscience make you linger,
Not of fitness fondly dream;
All the fitness He requireth
Is to feel your need of Him.
I will arise and go to Jesus.
He will embrace me in his arms.
In the arms of my dear savior,
Oh there are ten thousand charms.*

Amen.

**These are some of the notes James Lamkin used in preaching this morning’s sermon.*