

Stepping Out of Your Place

Luke 7:36-8:3

[A sermon preached by the Rev. Stan Gockel at the First Presbyterian Church of Portland, Indiana on June 12, 2016]

I

One of the unsung heroines of American history is Anne Hutchinson.

Born Anne Marbury in England in 1591, she was the daughter of a dissident Puritan clergyman and she educated herself by reading the books in her father's library.

At the age of 21, Anne married a neighbor, William Hutchinson, also a Puritan, and in 1634 they and their children sailed for New England in search of freedom from religious persecution.

They settled in the Puritan Colony of Massachusetts, where Anne began holding weekly Bible studies for women in her home.

She attracted a lot of attention, and men began attending her studies. Eventually over 80 people—both men and women—attended and the study had to be moved to a church.

The leaders of the colony, however, were not pleased. They accused Anne of heresy and called her an instrument of the devil. In the words of one minister,

"She is a woman of ready wit and bold spirit who brought over with her two dangerous errors."

The first error was to disagree with the Puritan interpretation of Genesis 3 that gave special blame to women for original sin.

Anne taught that Eve was no guiltier than Adam and that men and women were equal before God.

The second error was her belief in the free grace of God that guaranteed our salvation in spite of any sins we might commit.

Sound familiar? I hope so.

As Christians in the Reformed tradition, we believe that there is always more grace in God than there is sin in us,
and, as Paul writes in Galatians 2, we are justified by grace through faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Anne was put on trial, found guilty, and banished from the colony—she ended up settling in Rhode Island, where Roger Williams and other like-minded dissidents had founded the colony of Rhode Island.

A portion of the accusation against Anne read:

"You have stepped out of your place, you have rather bine a Husband than a Wife, a preacher than a hearer, and a Magistrate than a subject."

Anne Hutchinson was a woman of passionate faith who stepped out of her place to use her God-given gifts in the service of others.

II

In today's Gospel lesson, we read of another woman who stepped out of her place.

Jesus had been invited to a dinner party in the home of Simon the Pharisee.

Now it might surprise us that a Pharisee would invite Jesus over for dinner.

Weren't the Pharisees his main opponents?

But we need to remember, the Pharisees were not all of the same mind.

While many opposed Jesus, there were some who were interested in his teachings, and those who, like Nicodemus in John 3, were drawn to him.

So Jesus dines in the home of Simon the Pharisee, and I can picture all the leading citizens of the town also present.

They would have dined around a low three-sided table where they reclined on their left side and ate with the right hand.

Most likely Simon's wife and daughters did the serving and then stayed in the background.

Houses at the time were arranged differently than they are today, with a courtyard that was more or less open to the street.

A dinner party such as this would have been a community event, with people standing around in the courtyard hoping to get some of the leftovers.

In the course of the meal, something happens.

A woman with an alabaster jar approaches Jesus.
(How did a woman like that get in here?)

She kneels down at his feet and begins washing them.
(I can't believe my eyes—she's touching his feet!)

At first, everything goes as the woman has planned.

She gets out the perfume, and then something happens that she didn't plan.

A dam of grief bursts insider her.

As she weeps, her tears fall onto Jesus' grimy feet.

Not knowing what else to do,
she lets down her hair and begins to wipe his feet,
kissing them and anointing them with the perfume.

In the process she violates several cultural taboos.

Women did not speak with or touch a man in public.

And a woman would never let her hair down except in the privacy of her own home with her husband.

III

Picture this scene in your mind, if you will.

Here she is at Jesus' feet with her hair down,
crying her eyes out...
kissing his feet right there in front of God and everyone.

Now, if she had been the right kind of woman it would be one thing...
but she was **that kind of woman.**

You know what I mean.

She is described as “a sinner.”

Perhaps she was a well-known thief or con artist.

She definitely wasn't the church-going type.

She might have even been the town harlot—
some commentators think so

Or she might have been a widow who had little income.

As a result she had to live on the seedier side of town and could not wash and dress like the religious folk.

Or maybe she was divorced.

In those days a woman could not divorce her husband but a husband could divorce his wife for about any reason—

if he didn't like the way she cooked or kept house,
if she was too talkative or nagged too much.

So divorce was a socially acceptable way to abandon one's family.

She might very well have been a thief or streetwalker.

The point is, we really don't know.

So let's not assume more about her than the text says.

What is important is that this woman,
no matter what kind of woman she was,
was truly grateful.

Jesus had done or said something that had touched her heart...
changed her life...
and in return she wanted to do something special for him.

So she made a spectacle of herself.

She has acted impulsively,
foolishly,
out of a desperate need to show her love for Jesus.

She *stepped out of her place* to express her gratitude...
and she did not care who saw her.

IV

Simon the Pharisee saw her, however, and he is angry and suspicious.

He thinks to himself:

"If Jesus is really a prophet, he would know better than to let this woman, who is a sinner, come anywhere near him, let alone wash his feet. She has stepped out of her place."

But Jesus is a prophet, because he knows what Simon is thinking.

So Jesus responds by telling a parable...

Two men were in debt to a banker. One owed five hundred dollars. The other owed 50 dollars. Neither of them could pay up, so the banker cancelled both debts.

Which of the two would be more grateful?

Simon answered: I suppose the one who was forgiven the most.

Then Jesus, turning to the woman, but still speaking to Simon, says:

"Do you see what this woman has done? I came to your house and you did not welcome me. You gave me no water to wash my feet. She has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. You gave me no kiss of greeting. She has not ceased kissing my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil. She has anointed my feet. She has shown great love.

"She has stepped out of her place!"

Then Jesus speaks directly to the woman:

Your sins are forgiven.

This set the crowd to murmuring—"Who does he think he is, forgiving sins?"

But Jesus ignores them and speaks to the woman again:

"Your faith has made you whole. Go in peace."

Jesus claims this nameless woman as his own,
celebrates her faith,
and sends her on her way,
forgiven and whole and at peace.

V

Friends, Simon's story is too often the church's story.

And persons like the woman in the story feel it.

There are too many people like her who are drawn to Jesus,
but who avoid the church like the plague.

Phillip Yancey tells the story of a friend of his in Chicago who worked with poor persons in the city. He was visited once by a prostitute who was in dire straits.

She had been renting out her two-year old daughter to men for sex in order to support her drug habit; and she was homeless, sick, and unable to buy food for herself or her daughter.

Yancey's friend asked if she had thought about going to a church for help, and the woman seemed horrified.

"Church?! Why would I ever go there? I was already feeling terrible about myself. They'd just make me feel worse."

That woman had experienced church as a place of judgment and inhospitality.

In his commentary on our text Fred Craddock wonders where one goes when told to go in peace as Jesus instructs this woman to do at the end of our story.

"What she needs," Craddock says, "is a community of forgiven and forgiving sinners. The story screams the need for a church, one that says you are welcome here."

She had such a welcome from Jesus.

What about our church?

Would she be welcome here?

An ancient legend tells how Judas, after his death, found himself at the bottom of a deep and slimy pit.

For thousands of years he wept his repentance, and when the tears were finally spent, he looked up and saw way, way up a tiny glimmer of light.

After he had contemplated it for another thousand years or so, he began to try to climb up towards the light.

The walls of the pit were dark and slimy, and he kept slipping back down.

Finally, after great effort, he neared the top and then he slipped and fell all the way back down to the bottom.

It took him many years to recover, all the time weeping bitter tears of grief and repentance, and then he started to climb up again.

After many more falls and efforts and failures, he reached the top and dragged himself into an upper room with twelve people seated around the table.

"We've been waiting for you, Judas," Jesus said. "We couldn't begin until you came."

So many people are looking for a community of forgiven and forgiving sinners.

Is First Presbyterian Church that kind a community?

VI

Friends, what would it mean for each of us to step out of our place and take the risk of serving someone like the women in our gospel story?

Perhaps, since Jesus has already given his life for us,
he is not calling us to be martyrs.

Perhaps, he is only calling us to be willing to step out of our place.

What might it look like,
in our daily lives,
in our life as a congregation,
to step out of our place?

When and how and where does Christ call you to step out of your place?

To help others...
to stand up for the truth of your convictions...
to promote justice and peace for all people...
to perform an act of kindness...
to share the love of Jesus....

Often we recognize an opportunity to step out of our place only in retrospect:
like...

Why didn't I help that elderly lady with her groceries?

Why didn't I check on my elderly neighbor?

Why wasn't I friendlier to that teenager?

Why didn't I invite that friend or neighbor or family member to come to worship with me?

Why didn't I share my lunch with my hungry classmate?

Why didn't I speak up for my friend at work?

Why didn't I ask that new kid to go to the water park with us?

Why didn't I remind my friend, spouse, partner, child, parent, that we are all beloved children of God,
and that God is present to us, no matter what?

Luke goes on in the first three verses of chapter 8 to tell us of a whole group of women who stepped out of their place to follow Jesus.

Mary Magdalene, whom Jesus healed of seven demons...
Joanna, a woman of prominence in the royal court...
Susanna,
and many others.

They followed Jesus,
they supported his ministry financially,
and some of them would be the first witnesses to the resurrection.

Like the woman who anointed the feet of the master,
they answered Christ's call,
they stepped out of their place,
they made a difference in the lives of the people around them.

Our challenge is to recognize when Christ calls us to step out of our place,
to watch for opportunities to help others,
to show kindness,
to advocate for those in need...

to use every opportunity to share the good news of Jesus Christ.

VII

A final point: it was not the anointing of Jesus' feet that saved this woman.

It was her faith that saved her.

Jesus did not forgive her because she washed and anointed his feet.

Jesus forgave her because of her faith.

Paul in our lesson from Galatians makes this point:

"We know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ...because no one will be justified by the works of the law." (Gal. 2:16)

Anne Hutchinson must have known that verse as well.

We step out of our place,
not because we have to,
not to do a good work in order to be saved.

We step out of our place in faith in loving response to a God whose Son was willing to die for us.

We step out of our place because God's love calls us to do the right thing,
even when it might cost us personally.

So we are called, probably not to martyrdom.

We are called simply to step out of our place for the sake of love,
to take a risk,
to do the right thing;
knowing that God steps out with us,
guarding,
guiding,
protecting,
encouraging us every step of the way...

and forgiving us when we fail.

When we have the courage to answer God's call,
to step out of our place,
then we will hear Jesus say to us:

**"Daughter, son,
your faith has saved you.
Go in peace."**

Step out of your place and God will show you the way.

Amen.

Sources:

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