

Homily Pentecost 4C
June 12, 2016
Grace, River Forest

1 Kings 21:1-10, 15-21a
Luke 7:36-8:3

Contrasts

In Jesus' name. Amen

I'm sure you've noticed the trend in baby girls' names the last several years: the return to names from olden times: Sophia. Emma. Isabella. Lily. Emily. Madelyn. Abigail. Those are all wonderful names, but I personally have been disappointed that one of the olden names failing to make a comeback is "Phyllis." Goodness. Clara and Penelope are back, but not "Phyllis." However, it could have been worse, I now realize: my parents could have named me "Jezebel." I'm quite sure "Jezebel" will never make the list of the top 100 names.

And with good reason. Just look at today's first reading. King Ahab takes to his bed and won't eat, pouting because Naboth won't sell or swap his family's land, next to the palace. Author Frederick Buechner says, "It was the kind of opening Jezebel was always on the look-out for. Was [Ahab] a king or a cup [of] custard? she asked, and proceeded to take charge." (*Peculiar Treasures – A Biblical Who's Who*, "Ahab," p. 10) Jezebel hatched a plan to get rid of Naboth: writing letters to the town's leaders in King Ahab's name, sealing them with his royal seal, asking the elders to have two "scoundrels" present trumped-up

charges against Naboth, and then seeing to it that Naboth is stoned to death. The devious plan works perfectly, to a “T,” and there is no sign whatsoever of contrition on Jezebel’s part. But this evil does not escape God’s notice: Elijah confronts King Ahab when he goes to take possession of Naboth’s vineyard. “You have sold yourself,” he says, “to do what is evil” in God’s sight.

The unnamed woman who crashes the dinner party in search of Jesus in today’s Gospel is in marked contrast to Jezebel. Oh, she is, like Jezebel, a sinner. Through the centuries, many have labeled her a prostitute – because she had “a reputation” in town as a sinner. But the Greek word for “sinner” used to describe her is the same word Peter uses to describe himself after the large catch of fish, early in Jesus’ ministry. And we don’t need to imagine the woman crawling under a table “to bathe [Jesus’] feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair.” It was the custom in Jesus’ time to eat in a reclining position, so the text describes the woman as standing behind Jesus “at his feet.” (v. 38) As Queen, Jezebel was in a position of power, and she gladly usurped her husband’s power as well, and remained unrepentant for her actions to the end of her life. The unnamed woman in Luke had no power at all, but yearned to begin life again with a clean slate. According to one scholar, “the last thing” the unnamed woman in Luke “wishes to do is to find herself as the center of attention. Whatever draws her to Jesus must

be stronger than what threatens to expose her.” (M. Jan Holton, *Feasting on the Word – Year C, Volume 3*, p. 144) And what draws her to Jesus and led her to continue “kissing his feet and anointing him with the ointment” from her alabaster jar, Jesus says, is love, “great love,” for having “her sins, which were many,” forgiven. While Luke hasn’t made us privy to how or when or where it happened, somehow this woman experienced the reality of Jesus’ love and acceptance of her before she entered this house, and the relief of his lifting her burden of sin and shame. It is to make sure all the guests at the dinner party get the picture of what had motivated the woman’s love that Jesus says publicly to her, “Your sins are forgiven.”

In the story, Jesus also points out the contrast between the woman and his host, Simon. It turns out that she gives Jesus the hospitality that Simon totally failed to give: he provided no water for washing Jesus’ feet, no kiss of welcome, no anointing of Jesus’ head with oil – common courtesies to a guest.

But the greatest contrast in Luke’s story is the contrast between Simon and Jesus, in their attitude toward this sinful woman. This is the contrast we must pay special attention to for ourselves, because it reveals what concept we have of the righteousness of God. Bible scholar Gregory Anderson Love writes, “For Simon, the righteousness of God means that God cannot endure sinners, and a follower

of God gains salvation by upholding the purity code, with its separation of the elect from the sinners of the world. Simon judges the woman to be a sinner and himself to be different from and above her in status. He thus distances himself from her. Simon also distances himself from Jesus, whom he quickly disregards as a prophet because he lets the unclean woman touch him.” (*Feasting on the Word – Year C, Volume 3*, p. 144) But Simon has it all wrong. Anderson says: “the righteousness of God is the generous mercy of God.” And that’s exactly why Jesus became incarnate, to reveal on earth God’s “generous intention to heal life, restore relationships, and forgive the sinful.” (*Ibid.*) That is also why Jesus endured the cross for our sake, because, on our own, we are more likely to be into “simon-izing” – thinking that it is God-pleasing for us to separate ourselves from those we see as “sinners” or unclean. It is only through God’s grace and our baptism into Christ’s death and resurrection that we are forgiven, and can be forgiving. So if you have made some mistakes you regret, or have messed up your life good and proper like this unnamed woman, this is the place for you to be this morning because God wants you to experience God’s love and generous mercy to you in Christ Jesus. You are forgiven! And if you are more like Simon? Then this is the place for you to be this morning because God wants you to experience God’s love and generous mercy for you and for all people in Christ Jesus. You are

forgiven! For all of us here are invited to a supper party, where Christ and not Simon is our host!

But there is one more contrast in today's Gospel – it comes in the first three verses of chapter eight. Luke, and Luke alone of all the Gospel writers, makes mention of some women, in addition to the 12 disciples, who were “with Jesus,” as Jesus set about “proclaiming and bringing the good news of the Kingdom of God” to the surrounding “cities and villages.” Three of the women are mentioned by name – Mary Magdalene, Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward, and Susanna – as well as, Luke adds, “many others...who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities.” Women traveling with an itinerant preacher was not a common practice in Jesus' day; it was in stark contrast to what other itinerant preachers would do at that time. What the women are doing, of course, for Jesus and the 12 seems at first glance mostly traditional women's work – that is, “providing” for the group's care and well-being – buying food “out of their [financial] resources,” and probably cooking, washing dishes and doing the laundry. But that means they were not like the 12 – busy arguing among themselves about who is the greatest, while Jesus is heading to Jerusalem to die. Instead the women were willing to be among the “least,” serving Jesus and the others – even before Jesus' own example of washing his disciples' feet and calling them to serve one another. The

women were servants, as Christ himself came to be the servant of all. And unlike the 12, they stuck with Jesus all the way to the end. For we hear their names again as faithful companions of Jesus at the cross and at the tomb, where they become the first witnesses of his resurrection.

But back to chapter seven, for one more comment about the unnamed woman. At the end of the story, Jesus says to her, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.” One of my favorite preachers, Fred Craddock, asks this question in his commentary on Luke: “Where does one go when told by Christ, ‘Go in peace’?” (*Luke, Interpretation – A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, p. 106) In her prior life, Craddock says, the “one place” where the woman could go and be “welcome is the street, among people like herself. What she needs is a community of forgiven and forgiving sinners,” Craddock says, insisting, “The story screams the need for a church, not just any church, but one that says, ‘You are welcome here.’”

Here at Grace – “not just any church.”

In Jesus’ name. Amen