

“New Mercies Every Day”

June 24, 2007

Dr. Kipp Wolfe

Lamentations 3: 16-24

Luke 7:36-50

Today’s gospel reading is actually the lectionary reading from last Sunday. Because of Father’s Day, and because I chose to use another scripture for my text last Sunday, I decided to use last week’s lectionary reading today. I chose this scripture also because it is one of my favorite scriptures in the entire Bible. I don’t know if you have thought about listing four or five of your favorite scriptures from the Bible. You can learn a lot about a person from their favorite scripture. Our favorite scriptures not only say something about our understanding of God, of who God is; they also say something about who we are. They say something about our relationship with God.

This is a time for you of first impressions of me, so that’s one first impression you can have. This scripture from Luke is one of my favorites. I was concerned a couple of weeks ago about another first impression that I might make. It was our first Sunday here. There was a reception after both services, you might remember. Suzanne came with me that first Sunday to attend the early service because there was going to be a reception after that service. After we had walked through the fellowship hall and were walking through one of the hallways toward the chapel, I looked down and, just out of habit, adjusted my shirt sleeve. When I did that, I noticed something in there and pulled up my coat sleeve a little bit – do you know what a dryer sheet is? Cling Free or Bounce? I had a dryer sheet hanging out of my shirt sleeve! Isn’t that a wonderful first impression to make?

Last Saturday afternoon I was up here at the church. I like to come up on Saturday. It’s quiet, there’s usually no one here. It gives me a time to go over my sermon again and have some quiet time. That quiet time was interrupted by a voice I heard outside of my office. “Hello, is there anyone here? HELLOOO!” So I got up and went out in the hall and hollered back. Here came Dwight and one of “Tulsa’s finest” down the hallway. I had been given instructions about how to turn off the alarm system after I came in the door. Obviously, I did not follow those instructions well. The security company called Dwight, and he came here with this policeman, and Dwight was very kind. He introduced me to the policeman. I saw this look in the policeman’s eyes. The look was, “You dummy!” First impressions.

I would be interested in hearing some of the conversations in your cars after church as you go home. “Well, what did you think? What do you think about the new guy?” “Well, we’ll see. The jury’s still out.”

Suzanne and I have those same conversations. She says, “Well, what do you think about old so-and-so?” And I say, “Which old so-and-so are you talking about?”

This morning, I want to introduce you to another old so-and-so named Simon. We can learn a great deal from Simon. Simon was a Pharisee, which meant he was about as religious as you get. He followed the law to the letter, but there was something amiss in Simon’s life. If you read between the lines in this parable, what you can see is this: Simon loved his own righteousness more than he loved the woman in the story, certainly, but sadly, Simon loved his own righteousness more than he loved God. He just didn’t quite get it.

Simon thought to himself as this interchange between Jesus and the woman was taking place, “We were wrong about him. We had hoped that he was a prophet, but he must not be a prophet. If he were a prophet, he would know what kind of woman it is who is touching him.” Simon didn’t realize that Jesus knew exactly what kind of woman was touching him, a woman of the city, a woman of the streets. I don’t have to say anymore. You understand what kind of woman she was. Jesus knew that this woman was a child of God, and he knew that God loved this woman.

But it’s easy to miss something else if we’re not careful. Jesus knew also that God loved Simon. You see, even smugness is forgivable. Jesus loved the woman and all that she represents in each of us, just as Jesus loved Simon and loves the Simon in each of us.

Do you know what one of the toughest challenges is for ministers? One of the toughest challenges for a minister is to come into the pulpit and speak about the good news of a merciful God to people who often can treat the minister mercilessly. And yet, it is our calling to say there is mercy offered for all of us, for *all* of us.

Simon didn’t understand the true meaning of righteousness. My favorite writer, my favorite author, has written this about righteousness.

“You haven’t got it right!” says the exasperated piano teacher. Junior is holding his hands the way he’s been told. His fingering is unexceptionable. He has memorized the piece perfectly. He has hit all the proper notes with deadly accuracy. But his heart’s not in it, only his fingers. What he’s playing is a sort of music but nothing that will start voices singing or feet tapping. He has succeeded in boring everybody to death including himself.

Jesus said to his disciples, “Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven” (Matthew 5:20). The scribes and Pharisees were playing it by the Book. They didn’t slip up on a single do or don’t. But they were getting it all wrong.

Righteousness is getting it all *right*. If you play it the way it’s supposed

to be played, there shouldn't be a still foot in the house.

Frederick Buechner

Hear about another righteous man by the name of Jeremiah. It's probable that Jeremiah himself didn't write Lamentations. Probably one of his disciples, kind of like a traveling secretary, was with him and recorded his words and his thoughts. We can learn a great deal from Jeremiah. One writer wrote this about the book of Lamentations.

Lamentations is a searing book of taut, charged poetry on the subject of unspeakable suffering. The poems emerge from a deep wound, a whirlpool of pain, toward which the images, metaphors, and voices of the poetry can only point. It is, in part, the rawness of the hurt expressed in the book that has gained Lamentations a secure, if marginal, place in the liturgies of Judaism and Christianity. Its stinging cries for help, its voices begging God to see, its protests to God who hides behind a cloud - all create a space where communal and personal pain can be reexperienced, seen, and perhaps healed. Although the book of Lamentations is short, containing only five poems, it is a literary jewel and a rich resource for theological reflection and worship. Indeed its recovery in our communal lives could lead to a greater flourishing of life amid our own wounds and the woundedness of the world.

-Kathleen O'Connor

Jeremiah was known as "the weeping prophet." If he did not write these words, he lived them. Imagine this: Imagine 9/11 times a thousand. The temple had been destroyed. That's why Jeremiah and all of Israel were depressed. It is out of the depths of this grief that Jeremiah wrote about a God who it seemed had abandoned him. Many biblical scholars and Christian counselors think that Jeremiah might have suffered from some kind of depression. If you've ever lived with a depressed person, you're going to understand what I'm about to say. Depression affects not only the person who is depressed, it affects the entire family. I have a wonderful article in my office about depression and living with a depressed person. If you find yourself in that situation, I hope you'll come by, and I'll give you a copy of this article.

Depression can affect and *infect* an entire family, but it can do even more than this. It can infect an entire group of persons. It can happen even in a church. You have a few things go not exactly right, and suddenly an entire church can begin to believe that there's no hope. That's how Jeremiah felt. But then, as we read the scripture, it is as if suddenly he remembers and says, "I do have hope. The Lord is our hope." That is one of the most basic elements of our faith. The Lord is our hope - not our feeble efforts, not good luck, good timing or some outside agency or influence. The Lord is our hope.

When that woman in the story from Luke got up that morning, I think it was her intention to go and find Jesus, but I don't think she had any idea of the hope and the mercy

that she was going to receive from Jesus.

Let me ask you this - are you a lark or an owl? You know what a lark is, a person who bounces out of bed in the morning and they're ready to go. An owl is a night owl, someone who likes to stay up late and dreads getting up in the morning. There's another way to describe it. A lark wakes up and says, "Good morning, God!" An owl wakes up and says, "Good God, it's morning!" Nearly all teenagers are owls. We understand now, physiologically, teenagers need more sleep. Their brains are developing, and there's something going on that they might not understand, but they might need to sleep till noon. That's all right if they do.

I'm a little bit of a lark and an owl both. I can stay up as late as anyone, but the next morning, no matter how late I've stayed up or how early I go to bed, I'm going to wake up around six o'clock. I don't need an alarm clock. I don't need a lot of sleep - I don't know if that's good or bad. But, recently in my faith journey, I have discovered this: I can't wait to get up in the morning to see the new mercies that God is going to share with us.

There might be times when my faith is somewhat similar to Jeremiah's, but I remember God's faithfulness in us. The hymn writer has said we have God's own presence with us: "Strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow, Great is thy faithfulness! Morning by morning new mercies we see..."

What more could anyone possibly need? What is it that you need? Amen.