

11th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle C

2 Samuel 12:7-10, 13

Psalms 32:1-2, 5, 7, 11

Galatians 2:16, 19-21

Luke 7:36 – 8:3

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In John's Gospel, Jesus gives us a new commandment: "*As I have loved you*, so you must love one another (John 13:34). I suggest that this commandment means that when we are trying to express our love for each other, we should do our best to imitate the *manner* in which Jesus gives expression to *his* love. The usual occasion on which we have the opportunity to love each other is when we have a personal encounter with someone. So every time we encounter another human being, our ambition should be to relate to them as Jesus would in that situation. In order to make it possible for us to do this, we need to pay close attention to our Lord's personal encounters as recorded in the Gospels. For want of a better word, we need to study the "technique" he employs in these encounters, so that we can make it our own. Our Gospel this Sunday affords us an opportunity to do just that, but before we turn to the Gospel, let's take a moment to prepare the ground.

Jesus is quintessentially "the man for others." When he had encounters with others, their needs, not his own, were paramount. It wasn't about him. It was about them. This runs counter to our own instinct when we have a personal encounter with someone. Our deep-seated inclination on such occasions is to make it about us. Is this person a threat to me? Might this person be useful to me? Will they admire me? Will they say nice things about me to others? We need to overcome this

instinct by the grace of God, through prayer, and by disciplined practice. We need to learn to trust that God will look after us in the moment, so that we can afford to look after this person that God has sent our way. And, of course, regarding the needs of another as more important than our own is a pretty fair definition of love. It is the way parents feel about their children and lovers and friends feel about each other. It is the reason that Jesus is able to say that the consummate expression of love is to lay down one's *life* for a friend (John 15:13). The breathtaking ambition of Christianity is to universalize this love. We will only get there by disciplined imitation of our master.

We regard it as a triumph of selflessness when we allow ourselves to be interrupted by another – when in the midst of the heavy demands that our own life and our own plans place on us, we manage to take time for some else's needs. But even this is not enough. It isn't enough to patiently endure another's complaints until they've said their piece and gone away. In the words of University of Portland theologian Rene Sanchez, we need to allow ourselves to be not only interrupted, but *disrupted* by them. We need to allow our own plans and our own ideas to be changed in the encounter.

With all this in mind, let's turn to our Gospel. Jesus has been invited to dinner by Simon the Pharisee. Given our Lord's difficult relationship with the Pharisees, the occasion is fraught with tension. The tension is heightened when Simon fails to extend to Jesus the courtesies customarily accorded a guest. At this delicate moment, a woman widely regarded as a sinner arrives uninvited. Weeping, she bathes Jesus' feet with tears, dries them with her hair, and anoints them with expensive ointment. Jesus calmly accepts her outrageous demonstration of love

and gratitude in the presence of his host and the scandalized guests. But he does more than endure an extremely awkward interruption of his delicate plans for the evening. He lets the encounter be about her. Her needs in the moment are of paramount importance to him. He protects her dignity by drawing a favorable comparison between her and the righteous Simon. And he goes so far as to proclaim her sins forgiven, fully aware that those present will regard his words as blasphemous. (Everyone knew that only God could forgive sins.)

I ask myself what I would have done if this situation had been sprung on me. I imagine I might have said, “I’m sorry, Simon. Allow me to step outside to speak with this woman. I’ll rejoin you when I can.” Clearly I’ve a ways to go before I love as Christ loves. I’ll only get there by a close study of Jesus’ example in Scripture, by prayer, and by practice. Then, by the Grace of God, I hope that loving as Christ loves will become second nature for me, so that, in the end, it will be not I who lives, but Christ who lives in me.