

Catholic Church of the Beatitudes
Santa Barbara, CA

Homily for the 11th Sunday in Ordinary Time
June 11, 2016 (Year C)

Anne Goodrich Heck

Reflections on
2 Sam. 12:7-10, 13; Gal. 2: 16, 19-21; Luke 7: 36-50

Today's readings give us two stories that end with the forgiveness of sin, which is evidently the theme for today. Yet, there are huge differences between them! Here are some of the few things they have in common: They both feature two men, engaged in a conversation about sin, involving a woman. Oh, how I wish we could get away from equating sin with sex, or other "pelvic issues!" And why are the women, always left out of the discussion? Why do we never hear *their* side of the story? Women tend to be slotted into rather stereotyped roles.

If, instead, we looked at these stories through the eyes of women, it might keep us from falling into habitual interpretations!

The story of David and Bathsheba is about a totally egregious sin committed by King David, who, like many privileged and powerful men, seems to feel entitled to have sex with any woman he desires. Bathsheba has no idea that David has been spying on her from his palace rooftop until he summons her to his bed. She has no choice in the matter. When she finds herself pregnant, she informs David, who then makes various attempts at a cover-up. They go from bad to worse, and the next thing Bathsheba knows, her soldier husband has been killed in battle—a death engineered by David.

Fortunately for her, David doesn't get away entirely scot-free, since David's court prophet, Nathan, calls him out, as we heard in our first reading. But before the scolding begins, Nathan tells David a parable, which is designed to get through David's denial to his conscience: A rich man, with large flocks of animals, is planning a dinner party, but instead of taking an animal from his own flock, he seizes a lamb from his poor neighbor. It is the poor man's only animal, a family pet, and a female. (Nathan is putting it on thick!) David is outraged at the rich man's behavior, at which point Nathan says "that's *you*, David"—and we hear today's reading.

In terms of Nathan's parable, Bathsheba is the lamb that is sacrificed on the altar of David's ego. She has endured sexual coercion, forced adultery, and the murder of her husband. Later she will endure the death of the child of that adultery. (David, to his credit, is heartsick, too, seeing it as just punishment for his crimes.)

Our lectionary gives us only a snippet of this very involved story: Nathan recounts David's sins (adultery, murder), David admits to it, and is almost immediately forgiven. Sure sounds like cheap grace—a slap on the wrist! But reading further, we find that there is some sort of karma at work. Nathan's prediction

about the sword never leaving David's house comes true. David's older sons engage in the same kinds of criminal behavior as David: rape and murder, and then attempt to usurp their father's throne. In the end it is the youngest, Solomon, David's later son by Bathsheba, who will eventually succeed his father as king.

Today's gospel tells a very different story. We have no idea what the personal history of this woman is, only that she wears a label: sinner. Her sins, whatever they were, would have been small in comparison to David's: probably they were the moral compromises inherent in a life of prostitution. Prostitution is rarely a freely chosen career choice; one has to wonder whether the circumstances of her life gave her any alternative. Whatever the case, she carries the blame for sin, while her clients get off scot-free. If Bathsheba is a sacrificial lamb, this woman is a scapegoat. In Jewish tradition the scapegoat was the sacrificial animal used on the Day of Atonement, on whom the sins of the people were ritually heaped before it was chased into the desert to die.

What we *do* know about this woman is that she has heard that Jesus is to dine with Simon the Pharisee. So she makes her way to Simon's house with her jar of ointment. Simon must have been a man of some standing in the community. There would have been other people milling about his house: other guests, retainers, servants, but she makes her way through to dining area, and finds Simon and his dinner guests "reclining at table." They are not sitting on chairs/benches with their feet beneath them, as we do at meals; they are lounging on couches arrayed around a table, their heads facing inward toward the table and

each other, with their feet radiating out behind them.

The woman comes in, by this time obviously overcome with emotion. What was she thinking and feeling? Perhaps she had seen or heard Jesus from a distance. She must have been moved by something: his words, or the quality of his presence. She must have sensed that he would understand the position she was in.

At any rate, she opens her jar of ointment, and starts to soothe Jesus's feet. Jesus accepts her gesture and her touch. He doesn't recoil, or shoo her away, which is what Simon seems to think Jesus should do.

Seeing Simon's disapproval, Jesus takes a page out of Nathan's playbook by telling him a parable, using language Simon can understand, the language of calculation! "There were two debtors, one owing a lot of money, the other not so much. Both debts were forgiven; which debtor was the more grateful?"

Do you see what Jesus has done? He has reminded Simon that we are *all* debtors, when we stand before God, Pharisee and public sinner alike. Jesus has leveled the playing field, erasing the bright line Simon has placed between himself and the woman. More importantly, he has said that debt is not what matters; it is erased! *What matters is gratitude, and generosity (love)*. We are not supposed to be keeping a balance sheet, a running tab of our debits and credits (let alone those of others!). We are supposed to be living a grateful and generous life

This is where the woman excels, and where Simon has fallen short. Simon has measured out his hospitality, calculating how much honor to show his guest. He has offered a meal, to be sure, but no water for Jesus's feet, no kiss

of greeting, no oil of gladness to celebrate his presence.

For Jesus, the woman is already living in the reign of God, because she shows evidence of a grateful and generous life. That is why her “many sins” have already been erased, are forgiven. Jesus then affirms this to her by addressing her directly, and with respect: *Your faith has saved you; go in peace.*

This woman’s story is a powerful message for us today, and not just one of comfort—that we don’t have to worry about our balance sheets. It is also one of challenge, because the woman forced to wear the label of “sinner” stands for so many other people, of both genders, and all races, religions, and social classes, people who are pushed to the margins,

and then labeled, scapegoated, and silenced. Think of undocumented workers, to pick one example, hard-working people living in difficult circumstances, who find themselves smeared as “criminals” because they lack papers. In this crazy political season there is a lot of name-calling going on, so I am sure you can find many other labels to define others as “them” rather than “us.”

To live in the reign of God, however, is to receive such “sinners,” as Jesus did, to acknowledge their human dignity, and speak up on their behalf if they cannot speak for themselves. It is also to imitate the sinner woman in generosity, to pass on, in gratitude, the blessings we have received.