

**Catholic Church of the Beatitudes
Santa Barbara, CA**

7th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle C

Kathleen Dewey

A Reflection on Forgiveness,* focusing on Luke 7: 36-50

Several years ago, in going through my mother's effects after her death, I found her journal. And I read something that surprised me. Mom was recalling an event from her childhood; she referred to it as "Aunty Frances' *Let's Love Each Other Party*."

Mom writes: "When I was 8 or 10 years old Aunty Frances (who was a gorgeous tall graceful redhead who sang like an angel and played the piano) had a family party at her home. (She had married.) I guess she thought the bad feelings had gone on long enough. She invited Grandpa. I think all child's anger and sorrow was ended. Aunty Frances' party was the first time I ever saw Grandpa, but we all saw lots of him after that."

Mom was seventy years old when she wrote this, but we can still hear echoes of the voice of the child who had sadness in her life because of unresolved hurt feelings in the adults of the family.

Unfortunately, family estrangements are not unique. My mom's story may sound familiar to some of *you*. Failure to forgive can be insidious. In my family it has woven its way through several generations. My brother Dick, whom many of you have met, has four grandchildren he has never seen.

The theme of forgiveness is impossible to ignore in today's readings. I counted – we've heard the word "forgiveness," or some form of it, 12 times this afternoon. Luke's dramatic story is the one that grabs my attention. It is ritual; it is sacrament.

The woman is a sinner. That is her only identity. An outcast – a beloved of Jesus. Or maybe, *therefore*, a beloved of Jesus. She carries her shame and humiliation publicly.

She may as well be wearing a scarlet letter around her neck, and I think we can all guess what that letter would be. The desire of her heart is to unburden herself. She is ready; she is repentant.

Upon learning that Jesus is at Simon's home, she must go. The woman takes something with her, something special, a healing balm in a delicate alabaster flask, sparkling in the sun as she hurries through the city. What faith she has in Jesus—she is not invited, indeed, is not even wanted. There is no place for a sinner, a woman at that home, at that table, at that Eucharist—not unknown, even in 2010.

The woman walks into the room. The aroma of food and wine is heavy in the hot air; the dust from the road swirls around; the room is full of sound and activity—animated conversation, laughter, arguments, the sound of wine poured and cups clanking against one another, people moving about, passing the food, greeting each other. And *despite* all this, her weeping is surely heard. That's not a sound that can be ignored. The woman, the sinner looks up into the face of love, and all her sorrow, all her burdens are poured out in washing the feet of Jesus with her tears. She dries Jesus' feet with her hair. She is fully involved in this ritual, physically and emotionally.

Luke then adds the lovely symbolism of the anointing with the ointment/oil she brought with her. It is a healing balm on the feet of Jesus and also on her hands. It has the feeling of intimacy and finality as the ritual is now coming to an end. And then those amazing words. We've all heard them many

times, but I ask you to close your eyes for a minute and let them wash over you again. “Your sins are forgiven. Your faith has saved you; go in peace.”

Those last three words are just as important as the others. Go in peace. They express the great *gift* of forgiveness - freedom, the freedom to be whole, to be at peace with oneself and one’s community. We’re no longer bound by guilt or shame; we’re no longer bound by holding on to the righteousness of someone else having hurt us. Henri Nouwen calls it “the freedom to move on.”

This community has done a lot of “moving on,” both spiritually in Nouwen’s sense and literally from one location to another, with our cars full of albs and wine and Eucharistic vessels and crosses and worship aides, and so on. Our first Mass as a community was at Suzanne’s home in September 2008. We had a Newsletter distribution of sixteen. We had no name. At a community meeting a month later, we chose to be called The Church of the Beatitudes [later formalized as The Catholic Church of the Beatitudes]. The Newsletter reported that Carol, Pat, and Suzanne had met to explore the question of becoming a 501(c)(3). Lynn K. and I began work on a Mission Statement.

When we moved our Sunday Mass into the Carpinteria Library for a few months, the Newsletter recorded that Suzanne asked for volunteers to set up the space each week and put everything back just as we had found it. That sounds familiar. We finally found our home here at First Congregational Church almost a year ago. Our current Newsletter distribution (mid-June 2010) is 82.

And now the Beatitudes Community has more “moving on” work to do - studying the bylaws, choosing our servant leaders, establishing practices to follow, having two more priests, a more public presence, and a growing community. We’re the community for whom Luke writes. We’re the new family

on the block, but a family empowered by the Holy Spirit and prepared to act on it. We go in faith with no guarantee of where our path will take us.

Like the early Christians, we’re anxious to move on and live out our Vision Statement. Like the early Christians, we find that, despite our desires and good intentions, our path isn’t always smooth. In our spiritual moving on, it would defy reason if there *weren’t* rocky places, a variety of opinions, some misunderstandings, and plenty of opportunities to say, “I was wrong. I’m sorry.” Today Jesus has shown us the sacrament of forgiveness—approaching in humility, the woman went to Jesus, owning her offenses, wanting healing. And we learned how to offer forgiveness—with a generous and compassionate heart, and also with understanding. Jesus understood the woman’s position in that room, so he *championed* her action, chastising Simon in front of everyone and praising the *woman’s* kindness.

Joan Chittister says “forgiveness is the measure of the divine in us.” Her words echo those of President John Kennedy in his famous inaugural address. As he concluded his speech, the last words Kennedy left us with, the words he used to define the work ahead of him were “... here on earth God’s work must truly be our own.” *We* are God’s hands now, hands to comfort and welcome the sinner or someone who may have offended us; *we* are God’s heart now—hearts to love and forgive and refuse to hang on to bitterness. The divine within us calls us to understand one another so we *can* forgive and then be free to love.

A contemporary poet puts the question to us with these words: “Is there anyone we wouldn’t love if only we knew their story?” “Is there anyone we wouldn’t *forgive* if only we knew their story?”

Amen!

* This homily addressed the role of forgiveness as the Church of the Beatitudes looked back to see how we began and looked forward to where God would take us next. It was a time of transition in the community.