

GUILT TRIP FOR THE GUILTY

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The Psalmist said: *Happy are they whose transgressions are forgiven, and whose sin is put away! Happy are they to whom the Lord imputes no guilt, and in whose spirit there is no guile! (Psalm 32:1-2)*

Having lived in the Grace Church rectory now for 12 years, we have grown accustomed to the noise from Webster Hall. Most of you know that Webster Hall is a gritty nightclub and concert venue on East 11th Street, just a half block from the back of the church. The place seems to shut down around 4 am, and if we've left the bedroom window open I can hear the hoots and hollers of the millennial generation filling the streets. I usually just roll over and go back to sleep, grateful to have learned that true joys are not to be found out there.

Last Sunday night, however, (actually, it was the wee hours of Monday morning), from out on the street there arose such a clatter that I sprang from my bed to see what was the matter. Thousands of voices filled the night air. It was so loud and uncharacteristic for the time of day, even for Webster Hall, that I decided to go out there, onto 4th Avenue, and take a look. 11th Street was wall-to-wall people. They stood on top of cars, trucks, and dumpsters. They'd climbed sidewalk scaffolding, light poles, and trees. Sirens flashed from all sorts of emergency vehicles. Police were shouting into bullhorns. As people rushed into the fray I asked a young woman what was happening. Was it a protest march? Was a building on fire? No, it was nothing like that. She said that Kanye West was coming.

Apparently, Kanye West had wanted to arrange a pop-up concert at Webster Hall. When he sent word out on social media, his fans dropped whatever they were doing at 1 am and started running towards 11th Street. Within minutes more people filled the block than Webster Hall could possibly hold. Kanye instructed his wife (whose name I refuse to mention from this pulpit) to call the mayor, close off four blocks, and set up screens so people could enjoy the concert. Alas, even Bill, our mayor, has his limits. The concert was not to be. Kanye did make a drive-by appearance, standing up through the sunroof of his car, surveying the power of his tweets. When police finally cleared the area, garbage filled the streets, cars were ruined, windows were broken, and neighbors were furious. This thing that Kanye had done displeased the locals. I wonder: who pays for the damages? Who pays for the police and emergency vehicles? Will Kanye West be sent a bill? Sadly, no. We, the little taxpayers, will absorb the cost of Kanye's irresponsible tweets and transgressions. But good news for Kanye and his fans: no criminal charges will be filed against him, and he's running for President in 2020. Stranger things have happened!

The Psalmist said: *Happy are they whose transgressions are forgiven, and whose sin is put away! Happy are they to whom the Lord imputes no guilt, and in whose spirit there is no guile!* In today's reading from the Gospel of Luke (7:36-8:3) we meet a woman whose transgressions were forgiven, whose sin was put away. The setting is the home of Simon, a Pharisee, who was hosting a dinner for Jesus. Luke reports that Jesus had been traveling the region surrounding the Sea of Galilee. Most recently he'd been in the town of Nain, where he raised to life the dead son of a widow. According to Luke, he'd *cured many of diseases and plagues and evil spirits, and on many that were blind he bestowed sight.* Along the way he'd been preaching and teaching. About what? Most likely about the grace of God. How do we know? We know because Luke reports

that the supposedly good and moral people were complaining about the company Jesus was keeping. He was “a friend of tax collectors and sinners,” they sneered.

Nevertheless, Jesus was attracting quite a following, and Simon the Pharisee was curious. It could be that it was a Sabbath day, and Jesus had been the guest preacher in the local synagogue. If so, it would have been customary for one of the leading citizens to host a dinner. In the time and place of Jesus, although only the invited guests could eat at the table, anyone could wander into the room and listen to the conversation. So it was that a woman of the city, described as a sinner – which is probably code for prostitute – came into the room. You heard how she began to make a scene: weeping over Jesus, wetting his feet with her tears, drying them with her hair, kissing his feet, and anointing them with oil. Awkward!

Jesus was neither offended nor taken aback by the woman’s actions. In fact, he immediately understood what she was doing as a sign of great gratitude for being forgiven of her sins. *Therefore I tell you, said Jesus, her sins, which are many, are forgiven.* What’s the back story here? Did the woman simply appear out of the blue? I hardly think so. Most likely she’d been on the fringes of the crowds listening to Jesus, and witnessing the miraculous healings. It seems that by the time she came to Simon’s house to anoint Jesus’ feet, she already understood her sins to be forgiven. Thus, it’s entirely plausible that she’d had prior contact with Jesus, perhaps even confessing her sins to him. She looked with deep remorse at the wreckage of her irresponsible life, and concluded that surely, if this man could raise the dead and give sight to the blind, then he could also cut her free from her sins. However it happened, the woman found release in Jesus.

I saw a video recently that might illustrate how the experience was for her. A dolphin that was entangled in fishing line swam up to some divers. They could see its inhibited motion, and they knew it needed help. When they cut away the line the dolphin swam away freely, joyfully. But then it came back to the divers and briefly looked each one in the eyes, as if in gratitude. Likewise the woman came back to Jesus in gratitude for the gift of forgiveness and release.

Strangely, not everyone wants the gift of forgiveness. Some people don’t think they need it. Simon the Pharisee didn’t think he needed much forgiveness. Oh, he would have agreed that in a general sense he was a garden-variety sinner. But the cords of death had not entangled him. And compared to the woman at Jesus’ feet, he would have judged himself to be a saint. Thus he sneered at her, presumably loud enough for Jesus to overhear what he said. Simon didn’t feel guilty. He didn’t feel guilty about not feeling guilty. Sin wasn’t really inhibiting his life. He was swimming along just fine according to the works of the law.

How about David the King? Did David think he needed forgiveness? In today’s Old Testament reading from 2nd Samuel (11:26 ff), we heard part of the story about David’s disastrous meddling into the lives of Bathsheba and her husband Uriah. David was a man with an outsized ego who thought himself to be the closest thing to God incarnate on earth. He could do whatever he wanted. Thus, he orchestrated a fling with Bathsheba and they conceived a child. To cover it up David arranged for Uriah to be killed in battle, then he took Bathsheba into his own household. I would say that’s quite a trail of wreckage. Did David feel guilty? Perhaps, but not so much that he should break his stride. He had a kingdom to run, after all.

Thus, neither Simon in the New Testament nor David in the Old could really appreciate the grace of God. They weren’t convinced their sins were all that serious. Likewise, you and I look at the woman anointing Jesus’ feet, and although we don’t sneer at her, it sure seems awkward. It’s hard to imagine ourselves in an act of such worship. What, then, is to be done with the likes of Simon and David, and perhaps you and me? Is God content to leave us with the delusion of our righteousness, entangled in the cords of death? Not really. What we see in the cases of Simon and

David is the deployment of pointed parables, one for each of them. These parables can be yours and mine as well, if we have ears to hear them. Parables can function like selfies. They turn the lens of the camera around on yourself. The difference is, you might not like what you see. You might not want to publish a book about the light they shine on you.

Take Simon the Pharisee, for example. After he sneered at the woman, Jesus said, *Simon, I have something to say to you.* Then he told him the parable of the two debtors. One debtor owed five-hundred denarii, the other fifty. Neither could pay, so the creditor forgave them both. Which one will be more grateful? Simon correctly identified the one who had owed more. Jesus then encouraged Simon to let the parable go to work on him. The woman's extravagant actions were because she is like the debtor who was forgiven much. She loved much because she was forgiven much. Jesus continued: *think not, Simon, that you yourself aren't a sinner. You failed in the simple task of providing hospitality according to custom.* You see, Simon was supposed to greet his guest with the kiss of peace, provide for the washing of feet, and anoint him with oil. A parallel today might be failing to take the coat of your dinner guest, or not providing a seat at the table. Was it an oversight on Simon's part, or a deliberate slight? Either way, Simon failed in the simple basics of hospitality, and Jesus seized on the opportunity. Jesus used the parable to pay Simon a backhanded compliment. *Agreed, Simon, your sins are not as many as this woman's, but they are sins nonetheless. Look at all your advantages compared to her hard life, and still you begrudge her. Why not rejoice that she has found release?* Jesus might have said to Simon: *I expected better from you!* In the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32), it's essentially the same thing the father said to the older brother: You are always with me, and all that I have is yours. Why not rejoice that your brother who was lost is now found? *I expected better from you!*

Likewise, we heard how David the King was told a parable all his own. When Nathan the prophet got wind of David's shenanigans, he stormed the palace and told him the heartbreaking parable of the poor man's one little pet ewe lamb. A wealthy man received a visitor but didn't want to feed him from his own flock. Therefore he took the poor man's pet and served up a lamb dinner for his guest. When David heard the parable, he wasn't aware it was a parable. He thought it might be a real situation in his kingdom that required judgment. He was enraged and pronounced a flurry of harsh sentences upon the man. Nathan the prophet said to David, "You are the man." The lens of the parable was pointing directly at David, causing him to see the trail of destruction he'd left in his own wake. Nathan went on essentially to scold David: *Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, I anointed you king ... gave you the house of Israel and Judah, and if this were too little I would have added as much more.* In return you take your neighbor's wife and have him killed? *I expected better from you!*

Is Nathan's parable a guilt trip? Is Jesus' parable of the two debtors a guilt trip? You bet they are! Guilt trips for the guilty are entirely in order. You can't appreciate grace if you are under the delusion that you have no guilt. *If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us; but if we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:8-9)*

Friends, the challenge before us today is to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, and strength. It is to give extravagant thanks for all the benefits we've received at God's hands. The way to get there is to let these parables go to work on us, so that God's grace can free us from the cords of death and the grip of the grave. Then at last we might sing with the Psalmist: *Happy are they whose transgressions are forgiven, and whose sin is put away! Happy are they to whom the Lord imputes no guilt, and in whose spirit there is no guile!*