



CALLED TO FORGIVE, LOVE AND BE HOSPITABLE

Catholics often don't get a good grade for being hospitable to strangers or newcomers who join us for worship. Some parishes do better than others. But for the most part, Catholic churches are not praised for seeking out and welcoming the stranger in our midst. This is something we can and must correct.

In "A Company of Strangers," writer Parker Palmer offers a solution: "When a community's identity is rooted in the truth that we are all members of one another-that our deepest identity is in our commonality in God-then it can embrace the stranger with grace and ease." Easier said than done, you might say. But in God all things are possible.

It was not possible for Simon or the other righteous religious guests in his home, to accept this notorious woman who came among them. They hardly showed grace and ease toward her, with the exception of a certain Jesus of Nazareth who attended the dinner. This woman had the reputation of being a sinner. For centuries the sinful woman has been identified as Mary Magdalene. This is never suggested by the Gospel and is in error. This woman is not Mary Magdalene.

At baptism we were indelibly marked as belonging to forgiving, loving and hospitable Christ Jesus. This baptismal mark lasts forever and can never be erased. We are his, now and always. But what are the signs that we belong to Christ? Where is the proof? Can others see Christ's light shining through us? Perhaps the greatest sign of all is that of forgiveness. But we could even go so far as to claim that it is nearly impossible for us to forgive without God's interference, God's grace. And by our baptisms, equal to forgiveness is love. Indeed they flow one from another.

Standing in the midst of the love and forgiveness gifted us by God is the spirit of hospitality. The three go together and can't be separated one from the other. Forgiveness, love and hospitality are truly signs that we bear the name of Jesus by our baptisms, claimed by Christ forever, bearing the name of Jesus for eternity. And this Jesus forgives, loves and welcomes all.

When the sinful woman wipes the feet of Jesus with her tears and anoints them with oil, Simon the host, who failed to welcome Jesus with the proper hospitality, is shocked. Simon interpreted Jesus' silence toward the woman as condoning her many sins. Jesus does not berate her or correct her. The culture would have expected it. Rather, Jesus ties together the virtues of hospitality, love and forgiveness. He accepts her gesture in silence. There is no condemnation in Jesus. The woman's love and hospitality (which Simon failed to provide) are a sign that she is forgiven. To love is to be forgiven and to be forgiven is to be welcomed into the very heart of Christ.

God wants to forgive. American Scripture scholar, the late Eugene Maly, summed it up this way: "What consoling truth is found here! Not only can I be sure that God's forgiveness is always present and that it really enables me to love in turn. Still more, if I find myself showing love (and genuine hospitality) to another, then we know that the divine forgiveness has been at work." What clear signs God gives us-and how readily we miss them! We need sacramental eyes.

Let us humbly look within at our incompleteness, sinfulness, failure and even refusal to forgive. Perhaps Jesus accepted an invitation to a Pharisee's house so that he would have the opportunity to show that he came to forgive sins. In Christ, God longs to forgive us-even our pettiness in refusing to forgive others.

May we heed the words of the Lord's Prayer we will offer just prior to our approaching the Table of the Eucharist to eat and drink the Body and Blood of Christ. May our Eucharist strengthen our resolve to welcome the saint as well as the sinner through the lavishness of God's grace. Then we may truly forgive in love-the love of Christ.

***Jesus forgives the woman because of her great love....Luke
7:36--8:3 (7:36-50)***

