

FOCUS THEME: The Simon and Woman in Each of Us

I. Introduction–Martin Luther Story¹

In the 2003 movie *Luther*, an early scene portrays Martin Luther wrestling with the character of God. Luther asks his mentor, an elder monk: “Have you ever dared to think that God is not just? He has us born tainted by sin, then he’s angry with us all our lives for our faults, this righteous Judge who damns us, threatening us with the fires of hell!” The old monk asks: “Martin, what is it you seek?” Luther replies, “A merciful God! A God whom I can love. A God who loves me.”

Isn’t that what we all long for? What we all want? “A merciful God! A God whom I can love. A God who loves me.”

II. *Without a Map* by Meredith Hall

Our St. James’ Book Club is currently reading *Without a Map* by Meredith Hall. In this memoir, the author shares her journey from love into a deep darkness and back out again. In 1965, in a small New Hampshire town, sixteen-year-old Meredith gets pregnant. When her pregnancy becomes visibly obvious, she is immediately expelled from high school, even though she is an A student and secretary of the Student Council. Her friends immediately drop her and won’t have anything to do with her again. Her mother’s reaction is: “Well, you can’t stay here” and tells her she will have to go live with her father and stepmother in a different town. Meredith asks her mother if she can wait to move until Sunday so she can go to church. Her mother looks surprised and says: “Haven’t you figured anything out? You can’t go to church like that. They won’t want us anymore.”² Meredith later writes: *No one from church ever called or wrote to me . . . The silence made me feel as if I had never been part of their Christian body. The beloved smells of wax and leather prayer books . . . the voices of the church rising together, proclaiming God’s mercy and forgiveness; . . . my mother’s hand wrapped around mine while we stood to sing and knelt to pray; . . . the permanence and comfort of the affection of the grownups. The radiant, bored peace of church. All this evaporated when word got out.*³

Meredith moves into the home of her father and stepmother, who confine her to the house and admonish her never to be seen outside. Days after giving birth, the baby is put up for adoption. And thus begins a journey for this young, 16-year-old girl that leads her into isolation and darkness, as she is betrayed and exiled from her school, her home, her church, her community. Despair, shame, and loneliness surround her, while at the same time a watchful defiance begins to saturate her young life. Though she hungers for love, she develops a “tough resistance to trust.”⁴ Her life spirals ever deeper into darkness and searing isolation. “*The hole in me grows,*” writes Hall. “*I am becoming more and more isolated and recognize that I am*

¹Love, Gregory, as printed in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 3. Ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, Kentucky, 2010) 140.

²Hall Meredith, Meredith, *Without a Map* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2007) xix.

³Hall, Meredith, xix.

⁴Hall Meredith, 35.

walking my way into perfect disconnection.”⁵

I haven't finished reading this book yet, but as I read the first part of this memoir, I couldn't help but see the parallels with today's gospel story: A religious community that rejects and ostracizes a perceived sinner.

III. **At the House of Simon, the Pharisee – Luke 7:36-8:3**

A man by the name of Simon has invited Jesus to dinner. Simon is a Pharisee, which means he is devoutly religious and a deeply pious man. If Simon were a member of our congregation today, he would be a highly respected and active lay leader; he would never miss Sunday worship; and he would probably be serving on several church committees.

While Simon and his guests are gathered around the table, an uninvited woman, known to be a sinner, disrupts the dinner party and makes a scene. Luke, the gospel writer, doesn't tell us the exact nature of her sin, but it's apparently known by everyone in town. Simon, and presumably his other dinner guests, have probably treated this woman very much the same way Meredith's family, church, and community treated her: shunning; isolation; shaming. So when this woman shows up at Simon's home, looking for Jesus, Simon and his friends want nothing to do with her. And they judge Jesus harshly for allowing himself to be touched by such a vile and shameful woman.

But Jesus, with his usual flair for seizing a teachable moment, not only allows the woman to offer her ministrations, he then tells a parable about two debtors. Jesus uses the story and then Simon's response to confront him with the reality of his own behavior. Jesus poignantly points out the disparity between the woman's behavior and Simon's behavior and in the comparison, Simon does not come out quite so respectable. He is not quite as pious, in his self-assumed moral rectitude, as he would like to believe himself to be. Whereas the woman, whom Simon has judged to be so unworthy and shameful, has transcended the expected etiquette of hospitality by offering Jesus her tears, her hair, and her kisses, Simon has failed to provide even the most perfunctory of expected hospitality to his guest – no water, no towel, no kiss. Who is the one who has failed and who stands in need of forgiveness in this story?

The Challenge of This Gospel to Us

I suspect there is a bit of the woman and a bit of Simon in all of us. Many years ago I was talking with a spiritual mentor one afternoon. She said to me, “Cindy, tell me the one thing you don't want to share with anyone; the one thing you don't want anyone else to know about.” My immediate reaction was: “And why would I want to tell you?!”

But think about that a moment . . . the one thing you would not want anyone else to know about you. Yes, there's a bit of the woman in each of us. I believe this gospel story strives to remind us that no matter how dark our past may seem, no matter how terrible a deed we may have committed, no matter how unworthy we may feel, there is a loving God who wants us to come to him - a God who reaches out to us; a God who offers a forgiveness that not only wipes clean the slate but also lifts the burden of shame. This is a God who wants to give us back value and worth (no matter how unworthy we might feel). Just like Luther, we are all in need of “a merciful God! A God whom I can love. A God who loves me.” The question is, will we, like the woman, come to Jesus? Or will we play Simon and maintain a stance of self-righteous rectitude?

Just like there's a bit of the woman in all of us, there is also a bit of Simon in all of us, particularly those of us who work hard to be upright and religious. It's all too easy to live in denial and not even recognize the sin that lurks within us or within our community. After all, some of

⁵Hall, Meredith, 101.

those things we do: they're not really so bad . . . are they? Certainly not like the 16 year who got herself pregnant! Or the "*woman in the city*." Yes, there's a Simon in all of us – quick to see the sin in others, but not in ourselves.

We can only hope and pray that God will provide us with someone who will help us to see the truth (as Jesus' parable demonstrated the truth to Simon or Nathan pointed out the truth to King David in the Old Testament lesson today) .

IV. CONCLUSION

The Good News is that God in great love reaches out to us, challenging and confronting us. Sometimes we may find ourselves wonderfully affirmed and fulfilled. At other times, an encounter with truth may leave us feeling exposed, with the walls of our self-centered and self-constructed righteousness crumbling. We can flee from such exposure, or we can seek to hear the truth, which then opens the possibility for forgiveness, healing, and change. Grace always accompanies truth, even painful truth about ourselves. So strive to listen to those prophetic voices that speak truth to you. Welcome the truth. And then we, like the woman in Luke's gospel, we'll also hear the voice of Jesus say to us: "*Your sins are forgiven . . . Your faith has saved you; go in peace.*"