

In the small town where I grew up, our idea of going out for foreign food was to go out for Italian. If we wanted to experience other ethnic food, we could only do so in the summer, when the local Catholic Churches held their lawn fetes. My mouth waters as I think of going to Sacred Heart and enjoying peirogis, kalumki (stuffed cabbage) and Polish sausage, or to St. Mary's where all kinds of Italian specialties were offered. Asian food of any type was simply not available. My sense of what might be exotic and tasty was rather limited.

In the early 1980s, my parish sponsored an extended family of boat people who came from Cambodia and Thailand. There was a real sense of excitement in the congregation as we found places for them to live, furnished the apartments, and laid in supplies of American food. My mother, who spoke French, eagerly signed up to be an English as a Second Language teacher, thinking that if the family had any education that there would be a shared language of French. Her intuition proved to be correct.

Shortly after the families had moved in and were settled, they invited members of the parish over for a meal they prepared as their way of saying thank you. It was my first experience with something called sticky rice, rice

noodles, spring rolls and meats prepared in sauces I had never tasted before. Needless to say, it was delicious. None of the food shared was provided by our congregation - the family found a way to get to the nearest big city, some 30 miles away and found a grocery store that carried Asian food and the basket that creates sticky rice. The youngest members of the family danced for us in their native dress, beautifully choreographed. At this dinner, they told us that they would be attending our church services; that they had consulted with Buddhist monks and had been told that our worship was compatible with Buddhist teachings. They were letting us know that in their gratitude, they would become part of us. It was a memorable evening.

My family grew especially close to three members of the Cambodian family, a presumed widow and her two small sons. This was especially true for my mother. Over time, she learned about the horrible conditions they endured under Pol Pot. Pun, the mother, was a nurse in Cambodia and was working on getting her Certified Nursing Assistant certification in America so she could continue working in a field that she loved. She felt her English wasn't sufficient to try and obtain an RN designation right away. She told my mother that her husband, a doctor, was presumed dead. She told her of terrible privation and near starvation.

One day, after being in America for well over a year, she tearfully shared the more painful part of her story, a part of her life which caused her shame and kept her at arms length from the rest of her family. In order to give her sons something to eat, anything to eat, some small scrap - she had to resort to prostitution. Not just once, but many times. While she knew in her mind that she did what she had to do to protect her sons, to keep them alive, that a mother's love would do *anything* for her children, in her heart she was deeply ashamed and felt that a part of her character, the essential part of her being, had been forever marred. She felt the emotional distance from her family was deserved and yet she longed to be restored to her former position within the family group - she just didn't know how to get there.

I don't know what my mother said to her in her grief and shame and sorrow but I do know what my mother and father did. They made sure that Pun and her boys were included in every family outing and holiday they cared to come to. They were weekly guests for dinner. They became as much a part of our family as if they were born into it. My parents were their sponsors when they chose to be baptized - a joyous and happy day. And I

hope on that day, and every day since that Pun knew of the forgiveness Jesus demonstrates in our Gospel passage today.

Forgiveness is powerful and restorative. It repairs broken relationships and makes room for love and grace. It creates a grateful heart and the capacity to receive the forgiveness and the attendant love that comes with it. I looked up the definition of “forgive” and the first definition is “to give up resentment against or the desire to punish; stop being angry with; pardon.”<sup>1</sup> In looking at the definition, I thought - WOW - that’s HUGE, giving up resentment, anger and the desire to punish. What a gift for those we love.

If I know one thing about the entire witness of Scripture it is that God wants to be in relationship with us and we want to be in relationship with God. God has certainly set up expectations, expectations that Simon the Pharisee thought he was following. He kept the commandments and he kept all the purity codes. He had nothing to be ashamed of and he apparently had no feelings of guilt. In keeping the letter of the law, he failed to grasp the spirit of the law.

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<sup>1</sup> Neufeldt, Victoria, editor, *Webster’s New World College Dictionary, 3rd Edition*, (Simon & Schuster: New York NY) 1988. 529.

The unnamed woman DID have something to feel guilty about and perhaps felt shamed for whatever it was that she had done or was thought to have done. The whole community knew about it, certainly Simon knew about it. No doubt, she was shunned by her community. What we don't know about her is how she came to know Jesus and who Jesus represented. Perhaps she heard his Sermon on the Plain, perhaps she has been on the periphery of the crowds that followed Jesus and saw that the Centurion's slave had been healed and the widow's son had been brought back to life. Surely she saw Jesus' compassion for those whom he met and had a deep need.

We know somehow to move passed the shame, the woman screwed up her courage and slipped into Simon's house. Her tears, her expensive oil, and the use of her hair suggest extravagance and a certain level of intimacy. She is breaking all kinds of taboos and Jesus fully appreciates what she is offering him. He, in turn, offers her what she most needs: forgiveness.

Simon, who is correct if perfunctory in HIS behavior, doesn't see his own need for forgiveness. He doesn't see his own judgment of both the woman and Jesus. He doesn't immediately realize that when he answers

Jesus' question at the end of the parable that he has just correctly identified himself. Luke uses this story to show that the woman's love for Jesus becomes a sign of God's abundant love for us.

In Luke, when Simon Peter is called by Jesus, Peter responds that as a sinner he is unworthy - yet, he does indeed follow Jesus. The woman does as well. It doesn't matter what the sin actually is, what matters is the willingness to serve God. In our willingness, even though we might be broken and flawed, we become a means of God's grace. Our hope should be that we want to be part of God's story, just like Magdalene, Joanna, and Susanna. All of them were healed by Jesus. All of them served Jesus and helped him in his travels. They were just as important to Jesus as the Twelve. Because they were women, Luke is showing us that Jesus includes EVERYBODY, sinners, the shamed, the guilty, the broken, the shunned - EVERYBODY.<sup>2</sup> Not one of us, no matter how hard we try, is worthy of God's special favor. We don't earn it, it's a gift. As with any gift, our response is one of gratitude.

Today, as I invite you to confession notice that I always leave a pause. This pause is an opportunity to recall where we feel shame or guilt

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<sup>2</sup> Verlee A. Copeland, "Homeiletical Perspective," *Feasting on the Word, Year C Volume 3*, (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville KY) 2010. 145

or exclusion. Notice where you feel you fall short. Offer it up to God.

Know that before I even offer absolution, you are forgiven. God holds no resentment or anger towards you, God has no desire to punish you. Let this sink in. Then allow yourself to feel the relief and gratitude towards God. As you are forgiven, may God equip you to forgive those who have harmed you. And may all our relationships strengthen and bask in the grace we have received from God.

AMEN.