



'Conversations with a Savior: A Sinner'

Lectionary 11 – Fourth Sunday after Pentecost
8:15 & 11:00 am, June 12, 2016
The Reverend Nancy R. Easton
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church
Camp Hill, Pennsylvania

[2 Samuel 11:26-12:10, 13-15](#); [Psalm 32](#);
[Galatians 2:15-21](#); [Luke 7:36-8:3](#)

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

We're in the midst of a sermon series that deals with conversations various people have with our Savior Jesus. This series began two weeks ago, and continues through June 26. In most weeks, it's pretty obvious from the gospel story who is the subject in the theme. Two weeks ago we had the Centurion, a Roman soldier. Last week we read about the widow from Nain. Next week, Jesus will speak with a man possessed by demons, and the week after that, he will talk with those who want to be his disciples. These stories make the theme subject self-evident from the start.

Not so today. Our theme comes with some ambiguity. "Conversations with a Savior: A Sinner." Okay. Well, exactly WHO is the sinner here? As we imagine the scene before us, to whom do we look as we locate and label all the various characters in the story and then point to the one who is "a sinner"?

Well, Simon the Pharisee would say there is no ambiguity here. Simon would point to the unnamed woman who, uninvited, entered his dinner party to thank Jesus. Simon would say **she** is a sinner. In fact, he **did** say just that—under his breath, inside his mind, but deep enough inside his judgmental heart that our Savior Jesus could hear it. Simon labeled the unnamed woman. He called her "a sinner."

And suppose you and I had been there at that dinner party so long ago and had been aware of that woman's reputation, or had heard Simon's thoughts. We, too, might have said with confidence that the label was accurate. No ambiguity here. She was "a sinner."

But Jesus' conversation with Simon and the woman will, ironically, bring both ambiguity back into the scene, and then, finally clarity about just who "a sinner" is. And what happens when a sinner encounters the savior.

We are a judgmental society. No, on second thought, let me bring it down to the individual level. We are judgmental people. We cast a glance at other human beings, and render judgment. Usually without a jury. Usually without that other person's opportunity either to explain themselves or change our impression. Usually without first taking the log out of our own eyes before we've already noticed the speck of sawdust in theirs. And so often we judge harshly.

Take that mother at the Cincinnati Zoo, whose 3-year-old managed to slip away from her oversight and wriggle his way into the silverback gorilla compound. My first instinct, like so many others, was to say, "She needed to have better control of him. How could she not have noticed he was gone? What kind of parent is she?" There—I labeled her: BAD PARENT. I don't even know her and I wasn't there. But I, like so many others, judged her harshly. I was Simon the Pharisee, and I labeled her "a sinner."

Could I not recall moments when, under my supervision, my children managed to unbuckle themselves from a car seat or grocery cart, run ahead of me and get lost from my sight in a crowd of people, open up the cupboard of cleansers and sprays and poisons? Yes, given time I can recall those moments. Like when 2-year-old Sarah got into our packed suitcase for our vacation to Williamsburg, located a Ziploc bag filled with her prescription multivitamins, and ate them all up. There I was, the night before our trip to Williamsburg, calling Mr. Yuk and the Poison Control Center to find out what I should do next. (It turned out okay. The person on the other end of the phone said Sarah would be fine, but that she would have very expensive urine for a couple of days.)

But someone could have judged me harshly, couldn't they? After all, what kind of mother puts pills in a Ziploc bag and lets her toddler play with the suitcase? So there you have it—I was "a sinner." Surely judgment would have been rendered here with confidence.

But thank goodness for the powerful words of a rape victim whose impact statement went viral this week, and opened up this society's heart for a conversation about sexual assault on college campuses. Maybe we will stop judging young women who happen to drink a little too much at a party. Maybe we will stop labeling them as "a sinner" who in some way caused the sexual assault they endured.

For it is not ours to do the judging when that log is still firmly planted in our own eye.

At first, Luke's story before us displays this ambiguity about just who is "a sinner." Then Jesus' parable—his story within the story—brings about clarity. Jesus, having recognized Simon's judgmental thoughts, tells a story about two people owing debt to their creditor. One owed a large amount, the other a little. The creditor forgave both of the debts. So Jesus posed the question: Who will love the creditor more for the forgiveness of their debt? Simon reflected and said, "The one who was forgiven of much." Good answer, Simon. Right answer, Simon. Then Jesus goes on to describe the gratitude demonstrated by this unnamed woman who anoints his feet with ointment and washes them with her thankful tears. Jesus juxtaposes **that** demonstration of love with Simon's detached, perfunctory, and miserly demonstration of loving hospitality for his dinner guest.

The parable is not intended to suggest and emphasize that the woman is a great sinner, leaving us to let our minds run wild imagining just what exactly the woman did to deserve the title. Rather, it was intended to remove the ambiguity. The parable and Jesus' conversation indicate the woman and Simon are **both** "a sinner." And, if linked up with the characters in the parable, they both appear to be forgiven. However, that is where the similarity ends. For Simon and the woman differ substantially in their response to the Savior who forgives them.

Somewhere along the way—we don't know where or when—this woman must have had an encounter with Jesus. And through that encounter with Jesus she came to believe God had forgiven her sin—whatever that sin was. And because she trusted Jesus meant what he said, that God's judgment was mercy, that her slate was wiped clean, that in God she could begin to live anew and beloved, she was filled with love in return. So much so that she screws up the courage to enter a place where she will risk experiencing the old shame and ridicule, that familiar rejection and harsh judgment. She enters that dinner party and all its potential for labeling her once again because she wants to proclaim her grateful love for her Savior, the One who set her free from her sin once and for all. That IS courage.

We are judgmental people—and that reality alone renders a rightful judgment upon us that we, too, are “a sinner,” the very subject of our sermon theme. There is absolutely no ambiguity in this. And were it not for the fact that we have had an encounter with Jesus, we would be left mired in that judgment, bound by our guilt and immobile in our shame. But instead, we have had, and are **right now** having an encounter with our Savior. Those baptismal waters and the Lord's Supper, that absolution which followed our repentance, and now this ancient story we read of human response to God's wondrous grace given—**they** are our encounter with our Savior this day. And you and I, through this encounter, are now free to take the risk of loving and serving God and our neighbor in the midst of this world. We can do so boldly, and with gratitude in our hearts. Forgiven much, we can show great love. Thanks be to God. **AMEN.**

Copyright © 2016, Nancy R. Easton. All rights reserved.



www.trinitycamphill.org