

Today I want to preach about what our life as Christians means. And I want to do this in the context of our gospel today of the Sinful Woman in the house of Simon the Pharisee. This story from Luke 7 is an illustration of what the Gospel of Jesus IS, how Jesus' gospel, His proclamation of the Kingdom, changes our lives.

The British philosopher Anthony Flew just died. He was one of the world's most famous atheists. But several years ago he announced that he now believed in God. He had reasoned his way to that position. But Flew made it clear that he wasn't religious, didn't believe in praying to a personal God. God was for him a simple fact. Anthony Flew believed in the existence of God, but did not have faith.

That is not this sinful woman's experience. She has known what it is to be crushed by sin, the world, her own weakness, but also what it is to have been rescued – by a Personal God, by a Savior, not by an abstract philosophical fact. And that experience has turned her world upside down. She now has faith, and from that faith comes a new way of living. Remember Jesus' words to Simon, "The one to whom little is forgiven, loves little." In the words of the Anglican scripture scholar Tom Wright, for Luke "faith is what happens when someone looks at Jesus and discovers God's forgiveness -- and the sign and proof of this faith is love."

What about us? Jesus in the gospel today speaks of debtors owing 500 or 50 day's wages. How much do we each think we owe Jesus? How much are we in His debt? I think many of us believe, but with little or no such faith. We are more like Anthony Flew than the anonymous Woman of the gospel, because we don't think we need a Savior, or at least do not yet believe we have been rescued.

I believe we contemporary Americans find it difficult to see a need for a savior because we have a numbed sense of sin. Therefore, to try and give some kind of idea of what such an experience of sin and the need for rescue might feel like for those who haven't experienced it, let me use a natural analogy for this supernatural reality.

We have all heard of the huge oil leak in the Gulf of Mexico. An oil well, drilled into the ocean floor a mile down, is out of control, pumping who knows how many gallons of oil into the sea every day. The oil slick continues to grow. It's invading the gulf coast. It is killing birds and fish. And nobody knows how to stop it. It's scary. It's destroying the source of our life. And we don't know how to stop it.

I think of that mess as an analogy for our human sin – including original sin. It's something we began, and we're responsible for, but that we can't stop or fix. It touches everything. It threatens us. Even its black, sticky, smelly substance looks the part as an analogy for sin.

Walking past the bulletin board in the south narthex I saw a photograph of an oil-covered pelican – so very common bird on the gulf coast. Today the pelican is the innocent victim of our black sin. I thought that was very fitting. You may not know it, but in Catholicism the pelican is a symbol of Christ. The people of the Middle Ages thought that the pelican fed its young by plucking out pieces of its own flesh from its breast and giving it to them to eat – just as Jesus sacrificed His Body and Blood to feed us, so that we might live.

That pelican made me think. We assume that our human ingenuity will eventually solve the polluting oil well, don't we? But what if we couldn't? What if nothing worked? Imagine that it will eventually destroy the entire planet's water supply. That little feeling of panic at the thought is what I want you to think about. What would it feel like if the engineers and scientists told us, "We've tried everything, we can't stop it?"

But what if in our panic someone then said He knew how to stop the oil? Wouldn't we pay Him a million dollars for that? But what if He said the only solution was that He Himself would descend into the dark depths where nobody else could go? And what if He knew that doing so would crush Him, that it would His own body that would plug the hole in the ocean? But He was willing to do it, even though we had caused the disaster and He was as innocent as that pelican, all because He loved us?

When we say that Jesus is Savior we mean that He has rescued us from a danger to our very existence. Sin is worse than oil. With great difficulty we can clean up oil ourselves. But we can't clean our own sin. Only God can do that, as Jesus' fellow diners realize when Jesus shocks them by saying to the woman, "Your sins are forgiven."

How much is that worth to me? To be given the gift of faith means to come to know and see that we have been saved from destruction by another Person -- and gratuitously. The recognition of our weakness and god's love in the face of that weakness sparks our own love. In the gospel the woman knows she has been given the greatest gift. She's been rescued. When we too finally realize that fact, then we will really love, because we will see differently. "The one to whom little is forgiven, loves little."

In living the out faith we return God's generosity and love with our own. This story of the sinful Woman is an example of what that will look like concretely for us. She comes into a place where she is not welcome, even hated, to pour out costly ointment on her Savior, crying tears of gratitude mixed with repentance, letting her hair down, which no decent woman of that time would do, and wiping Jesus' feet out of love; knowing the Pharisees scorn her -- but not caring.

We're to do the same. If this example of the sinful woman does not seem beautiful to us then we're not very deep in the Kingdom of God, because that is a peek at its life. The Kingdom of God -- the power of the Gospel -- in our own lives means living out the experience of knowing we are sinners who have been rescued, forgiven, by the very death of Jesus Christ, God made Man. And in recognizing the love He has for us that motivated this sacrifice, we can return it. This returning of God's love means we will ignore our society's conventions as surely as the woman did in the Pharisee's house. It will raise new expectations for us; we will see ourselves now, not as society has told us we are, but as God sees us.

That is what the gospel of Jesus Christ does for those with faith. It is a new way of living. And that is the life we now wish to strengthen, or regain, in the Eucharist we have come to celebrate, for which, and in which, we give thanks to our Savior -- and live in Him anew.