

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

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

In the movie “Pretty Woman”, Julia Roberts portrays a streetwalker hired to be a temporary escort for a handsome, wealthy, and mysterious character played by Richard Gere. He gives her money to buy appropriate clothing for a fancy and important dinner engagement, and there is this memorable scene where she walks into an exclusive Beverly Hills dress shop in her halter and hot pants and high-heeled boots. The clerks’ looks register volumes. Their words to her drip with condescension. They know what kind of woman she is, and the likes of her don’t belong in a shop like theirs.

To be condescending to someone is to act as if that someone is somehow beneath you, not as good as you; not on the same level as you in, say, intelligence, breeding or physical attractiveness; not holding the proper political stance; not following the same moral standard. You and I have been on both sides of the ugliness of condescension. It hurts, frustrates, even angers us when someone looks down on us, or speaks down **to** us. And yet, which of us has not treated others in a manner that is condescending, believing we had every right to do so?

Today you and I hear stories from scripture where condescension and a holier-than-thou attitude nearly get in the way of the truth, until God makes clear that truth once again—that you and I need to be forgiven, and God has the incredible power to forgive.

Up to that moment of revelation in today’s first lesson, King David had forgotten that truth. First, we need to go back a bit. David—from the days when he was but a small shepherd boy—had been called by the Lord God to be his servant. David responded to that call, and the people of Israel, under David’s leadership, also responded. So, here he is, now King David, with power and popularity, with all the rights and privileges accorded a great king, including much wealth and many wives. But he thought he had the right to have more—even that which was not his to have.

He takes another man’s wife, Bathsheba. Then, in order to cover up her pregnancy and their affair, and ultimately make her his own, he has her husband Uriah moved to the front lines of battle where, inevitably, he is killed. It is the height of condescension, looking down his nose at the “little people” like Uriah and Bathsheba, moving them about like pieces on a game board. Does David suppose the Lord does not know this? That David can somehow keep it cloaked in secrecy from his God?

The Lord God knows precisely what David has done. But until the Lord God describes David’s actions through a story from the mouth of his prophet Nathan, King David does not recognize the full extent of his sin. It is that story—which we hear in our lesson today—the story of the

rich man who considered the poor man beneath him, and the poor man's little lamb expendable, which finally serves as the mirror for David himself. The mirror doesn't lie. David knows that what he did was against the will of God.

Move on to the Gospel lesson where we see the host of the dinner party to which Jesus has been invited. It may as well be a scene from "Pretty Woman"—the host, Simon, looking down his nose at the woman who enters the room and wipes Jesus' feet with her tears, kissing those feet and anointing them. Simon knows what kind of woman she is, and the likes of her don't belong in his home. The likes of her shouldn't be touching his guests. Simon doesn't speak his condescension aloud, but it is there. Interestingly, he not only looks down on this woman and her actions, but he also looks down on Jesus. Simon thinks to himself, "If this man **were** a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him—that she is a sinner." You see, Simon shows disdain not just for those he thinks beneath him, but also for those who do not stand shoulder-to-shoulder with him in the same disdain.

Makes me wonder if Simon listened to Jesus at that dinner prior to the woman's arrival. Hadn't Simon heard anything of Jesus' teachings? Jesus' words about the love of God? About the power of prayer? About repentance and forgiveness and new life? Apparently the unnamed woman with the unnamed sin had heard. Jesus—his words and his presence—moved her to tears, moved this "unclean woman" to dare to enter Simon's house to pour out her love and gratitude at Jesus' feet.

But if Simon had heard any of Jesus' teachings, it didn't make much impact on him. Even after Jesus told a parable of two debtors whose debts of different amounts were forgiven by their creditor. Even after asking Simon which of the two debtors would love their creditor more. Oh, Simon **answers** the right way: "I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt will love that creditor more." Like the prophet Nathan, Jesus offers a story that allows the one needing correction to consider his behavior and attitude. Like King David, Simon is given the opportunity to view himself from a distance through the story Jesus tells about forgiveness. But Simon still doesn't get it. Note Jesus' words here. Jesus doesn't accuse Simon of any particular **great** sinfulness. He doesn't lambaste Simon with a running list of his transgressions. But that wasn't the point. The point was always, always to proclaim God's forgiveness and the changes such forgiveness brings to people's lives. Jesus shows Simon the depth and fullness of God's forgiveness by considering the woman and her experience. Jesus says, "Do you see this woman? . . . I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love . . ." The woman responds to being forgiven with thankfulness and joy. That could be **Simon's** joy as well. Simon's entire life could be transformed. He, too, could respond to God with exuberance and thankfulness. But he never really bothers to look in the mirror. And he never really hears Jesus' grace-filled words. And he remains entrenched in the dishonesty of his own self-examination, and the disdain with which he views others. He and his dinner guests look down their noses once more at Jesus and sneer, "Who is this who even forgives sins?"

I'll tell you who forgives sins, both great and small. It is our majestic, mighty, and loving God. Oh, he **does** look down on us. But never in arrogant condescension, never with a sneer that implies contempt. Our God looks down upon us from the cross of Christ. He looks down upon

us with love and compassion, and with a willingness to suffer anything in order to change us. Paul's letter to the Galatians tells us of this willingness to do whatever it takes to save us from ourselves. Paul writes, ". . . I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me." God looks down upon us, and then does indeed descend to us, to our earth and its troubles, to our hearts and their hurts. And then he begins the massive undertaking of creating in us a faith as strong, as full, as obedient, as the faith of his most precious and only son. And the only way God can do that is to make his most precious and only Son dwell in each of us.

Everything comes from God. Every good gift we enjoy originates with our Creator. Every mercy we receive flows down from the self-giving of the Son. Every possibility and potential in our lives comes through the power of his Spirit. The unnamed woman with the unnamed sin is the one who simply and eloquently expresses our gratitude for it all. She shows us what it is to be the church, to be the people of God. She shows us what living by faith looks like. She shows us, as writer Kathleen Norris puts it, how "to laugh, and sing, and be delighted because God has called us his own." AMEN.

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