

"Stepping Out of Place"

Time after Pentecost – Lectionary 11
The Reverend Glenn E. Ludwig

Sunday, June 13, 2010
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Luke 7:36–8:3

This morning we have three lessons to ponder, all of them interconnected thematically. We have a history lesson taken from the annals of early American history. We have a scripture lesson unique in its emphasis by Luke. And we have a life lesson that's a derivative from the first two.

So, let's have at it – first, the history lesson. Does the name Anne Marbury ring any bells? If I told you her married name, I'd give the story away, so for the sake of dramatic appeal, I'll withhold it for the moment. The history lesson actually begins in England in 1591 where Anne Marbury was born. She was the eldest daughter of an Anglican clergyman who became part of the Puritan reformation in the mid-16th and 17th centuries in England.

By way of explanation, let's note that the "Puritan" label was not used by those in the reformed movement but came to be used as a derogatory term for those who sought to "purify" the church. These are the folks who objected to what they saw as empty ritual and ornamentation in churches, as well as the misuse of ecclesiastical power in the running of church life. As with all reformation movements in history, these Puritans wanted to restructure, reform and purify church practice through an emphasis on Biblical supremacy and a shared belief in the priesthood of all believers.

Because these Puritans were harassed and persecuted in England, they came to the New World in droves. From 1629 through 1643, about 21,000 of them immigrated to New England alone, founding the famous Massachusetts Bay Colony, and then spreading into Rhode Island, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, New Hampshire and Delaware. American religious descendants of this movement include Congregational Christian Churches (now part of the United Church of Christ), the Presbyterian Church USA, and even the Society of Friends of William Penn's Colony.

After that brief religious history, let's get back to Anne. She married her neighbor, William, another Puritan, when she was 21 and they had 15 children. Now, Anne was not a casual church-goer. She studied scripture and became immersed in it, as well as passionate about it.

When they arrived in Boston, she and William became part of Historic Old First Church there. Ann began a series of Bible study classes in her home, first inviting other Puritan women and then men. This was during a time when women did not entertain men in their homes. Apparently these Bible studies grew because it is estimated that over 80 folks gathered weekly. By the way, that's more than the average attendance in Lutheran churches in the United States today.

Well, according to records, these groups not only discussed the words of the Bible, they also engaged in discussion and, apparently, critique of the preachings and teachings of local ministers, a practice that did not amuse the good Reverend John Wilson of First

Church in Boston. How dare this woman not only challenge the authority of clergy, but deign to interpret scripture?

So, she was accused of heresy and lewd conduct for having men and women in the same house at the same time and, not only excommunicated from her church, but under civil law and orders from Governor John Winthrop, banished from the Massachusetts Bay Colony. She went on to Rhode Island and with Roger Williams became the only woman to co-found an American colony.

There is so much more to this alluring tale, but for the sake of time let me quote a portion of the charge leveled against her at the excommunication hearings. It is this charge that will tie our three lessons nicely together today. It read, in part:

You have stepped out of your place; you have rather bine a Husband than a Wife and a preacher than a Hearer.

Did you hear that? She "stepped out of her place," and because of that charge has been vilified, demonized and portrayed as a martyr for religious intolerance. A fairly recent biographer called her the "American Jezebel." Literary critics claim she was the model for Hawthorne's portrayal of the woman in his classic story, "The Scarlet Letter." But she has also earned her reprieve, for in 1987, then Massachusetts Governor Michael Dukakis pardoned her, revoking the order of banishment 350 years earlier.

Yes, Anne Hutchinson was a woman of vision, of passionately held convictions and a deep search for biblical and religious truth. She was not afraid to challenge the status quo, regardless of consequences. She stepped out of her place in history so that future women would have a place both in society and in religious circles.

For our second lesson to ponder this morning we actually step back in history to a Biblical time. Luke, of all the gospel writers, gives women a special role. Today's unnamed woman actually speaks not one audible word but speaks volumes with her actions. Luke simply identifies her as a woman "who was a sinner," a description which combined with her unescorted arrival at the dinner, her immodest and embarrassing behavior and that her hair was worn down, something married Jewish women did not do, has suggested to Biblical scholars that she was a prostitute.

By simply touching Jesus, this woman, this sinner, has ritually defiled him, whether she was a prostitute or not. She is present where she ought not to be. She has uncovered her hair in public. Simon the Pharisee, the host of the dinner party, responds with a typical, stereotypical, party-line judgment both of this woman and of Jesus for allowing it all to happen.

She has clearly stepped out of her place. And Jesus response? "Your sins are forgiven. Your faith has saved you; go in peace." She is not told to go and "straighten herself out." She is not scolded, belittled, lectured or admonished. She is forgiven – and that forgiveness became empowerment for a new life. Set free from what she has been, her faith in the One before her has freed her for a new way of living. All because she stepped out of her place to encounter and respond to Jesus. In stepping out without a word spoken she demonstrated the truth of Luke's Gospel – that God is not a goal to be reached, but a presence to be recognized and celebrated.

So what about the life lesson that we can derive from these two historical stories? Maybe it could best be articulated in a simple question that carries a personal and complex answer: "Where is God calling you to step out of place?" What might that mean or look like in our lives, both personally and corporately?

Might it mean to help others; to take a stand for something right and important; or to promote justice in the face of discrimination and injustice? Might it mean that we step out of our way to perform an act of kindness; to take a risk and share a part of ourselves with another; or to reach out a hand not knowing if it will be grasped or slapped? Might it mean speaking up against bigots and blow-hards, who need to hear that the sound of their whining is like finger-nails on a chalk board? To defend the rights of all people regardless of race, class, color, sexual orientation or religious affiliation? Might it mean to take a stand on issues that are publicly unpopular? Or might it mean to respond to the still small voice of God that is prodding and poking you to do that which you have wanted to avoid, but you know needs doing; or taking the scary risk to follow that longing and dream you have fanned the flames for all these years and never had the courage to act upon?

The stories today challenge the status quo in all of us. Faith, our faith, the faith we proclaim in Jesus, challenges us to step out of our comfort zones at times to respond to God's Spirit and God's calling to make this world a better place. I would contend that you cannot find a significant movement in history that didn't begin with someone stepping out of line to confront what they believed to be wrong. Martin Luther, John Calvin, Anne Hutchinson, Rosa Parks, Dr. Martin Luther King, the Rev. William Sloane Coffin, Billy Graham, Dietrich Bonhoeffer – and the list goes on.

Stepping out of place – we do that not because we have to, but because we are called to; because our faith gives us the courage; and because God's love challenges us to do the right thing, even if it costs us. We are called to step out of our place for the sake of the Gospel, to do the right thing at the right time; knowing and believing that God steps out with us, guarding, guiding, protecting and encouraging us every step of the way, and, we note, forgiving us when we fail.

Let me conclude our ruminations this day by reading a portion of an amazing letter that combines all the themes before us – stepping out, taking risks, forgiveness and its extraordinary power to give new possibilities. The letter dated October 18, 2006, reads:

Our family wants each of you to know that we are overwhelmed by the forgiveness, grace and mercy that you've extended to us. Your love for our family has helped to provide the healing we so desperately need. The prayers, flowers, cards, and gifts you've given have touched our hearts in a way no words can describe. Your compassion has reached beyond our family, beyond our community, and is changing our world, and for this we sincerely thank you.

Please know that our hearts have been broken by all that has happened. We are filled with sorrow for all our neighbors whom we have loved and continue to love. We know that there are many hard days ahead for all the

families who lost loved ones, and so we will continue to put our hope and trust in the God of all comfort, as we all seek to rebuild our lives.

It was signed "Marie Roberts," the widow of Charles Carl Roberts IV, the gunman who had killed five little Amish girls in Nickel Mines, Lancaster County, and wounded five others on October 2, 2006, before taking his own life. Marie wrote this letter to her Amish neighbors who had stepped out of all human expectations and, in the throes of their own grief, had the courage to reach out to Marie and her family, teaching all of us who witnessed that act a lesson in God's forgiveness and the power it has to change hearts and minds. Their stepping out enabled Marie, in the midst of her guilt and shame, to do the same and to begin her road to recovery with compassion, love and hope.

Where is God calling you, right now, to step out?

AMEN.

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