

**Sermon on August 19<sup>th</sup> 2007, 11th Sunday after Trinitatis  
Petri Church, 11.30 am**

Text: Luke 7, 36-50

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

Sisters and brothers in Christ,

Dear friends,

A famous British mathematician, G.H.Hardy, who died in 1947 had a discussion with a friend about the different kinds of fame a poet and a mathematician might acquire and in which way they would want to be remembered by posterity. As Hardy tells it, this friend of his put the issue very picturesquely to him; “when we were passing the Nelson column in Trafalgar Square (he asked:) If I had a statue on a column in London, would I prefer the column to be so high that the statue would be invisible, or low enough for the features to be recognizable? I would choose the first alternative” says Hardy, the mathematician, a poet “presumably, (would choose) the second”.

It seems to be the Hardy-kind of fame, that Matthew and Mark have in mind, when both of them tell their version of the story - about the woman, who poured a jar of costly oil or perfume on Jesus. They end their story –as you may remember- with these words:

“wherever in all the world this gospel is proclaimed, what she has done will be told as her memorial.” (Mt. 26,13; Mk.14,9). It is a very high column, indeed, on which this woman is placed in the gospel according to Matthew and Marc. No name given, no reasons, no motives; just the pure fact, that she came in and poured oil on Jesus; that the disciples started arguing about what a waste of money this was and that Jesus said: why are you bothering this woman? She has anointed me for burial. “Wherever in the world this gospel is proclaimed, what she has done will be told as her memorial.”

All of us, on this Sunday morning in Hannover-Kleefeld have been part of this chain of memory: because we just listened to the gospel according to Luke, which is the selected lesson for this Sunday`s sermon. But Luke tries to bring down that Nelson column a little bit, to let us see a little bit of the features of that famous woman. For him it is not just a woman, she is a character. Depending on which translation you prefer, she “had lived a sinful life in that town” or “she was living an immoral life in the town” or -as the King James version has it very close to the Greek original- she “was a sinner”. She is a character;

obviously a very emotional one. Her behaviour is extraordinary – even by near eastern standards 2000 years ago. She crashes into a company where she surely doesn't belong. She starts weeping; “she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them”.

We seem to get a feeling of her character, but in the end, I have to admit, we still don't know anything about her. What kind of sinful life is she leading? – we don't know. Is she a prostitute, a poor being, selling her body to make a living, as some commentators suggest? Or is she a rich, independent, extravagant lady who can afford to waste a bottle of perfume so expensive, that ordinary people would have to work long and hard for to pay for it? Is she one of those women, Luke mentions shortly afterwards in the next chapter? In a very general fashion he tells us that Jesus was going through towns and villages, preaching the Good News; the twelve disciples went with him and so did some women...some women, who “provided for them out of their own resources” (Lk. 8,3).

I have to say: Dear Luke, the column is still too high for me. I cannot see this woman up there. I don't even know, if her tears are tears of remorse, contrition, shame or, perhaps – why not?- tears of relief, of joy, of gratefulness.

When Jesus tells the parable of the moneylender and his two debtors, the obvious lesson to draw for Simon, the Pharisee, is this: The bigger the debt is, that has been cancelled, the greater the love will be. And vice versa: “he who has been forgiven little, loves little.” This logic would indicate, that this woman has already experienced forgiveness and is coming with tears of relief, gratefulness and love ..already knowing, what Jesus is going to say in the end: “Your sins are forgiven.. your faith has saved you; go in peace.”

Dear friends,

being a man I could find an easy way out by saying: it is difficult for a man to understand a woman and it is much easier to understand other men. For instance Simon, the Pharisee. It is easy to understand, that he is annoyed by this scene, but too polite to put an end to it. He expects Jesus to stop this woman making a scene. Stop her kissing his feet. If Jesus, his guest were in the least sensitive to what is expected of him, if he had any idea of what is proper behaviour, he would stop her. Simon the Pharisee has invited Jesus for dinner,

because he is interested in this man. There are rumours he might be a prophet. But wouldn't a prophet be more discerning, more careful whether good or bad people are close to him?

And, of course, there is no problem in understanding the other guests. They are as irritated by this scene and they are as embarrassed as their host. And: they sense a transgression of an even more severe kind. Not just bad behaviour. There is a dangerous transgression of basic values. Their comment is focused not on the woman, but on Jesus: "Who is this, who even forgives sins?" We know, what resulted from this complaint. They charged him with blasphemy, with perverting the basic order of things, with endangering the fragile political-religious equilibrium...it ended in crucifixion..

If we stop for a moment looking at that woman; if we look at the whole scene – I think- the real tension we feel, is not caused by the embarrassing behaviour of this woman. The real tension originates from the uncanny feeling, that Luke is telling us not so much about a singular extraordinary –maybe even legendary- event, far away in history. He is rather telling us something very ordinary, something deeply embedded in every day life . It is a story about this unexplainable trait of human beings, which made Jonathan Swift remark: "We have just enough religion to make us hate, but not enough to make us love one another."

In the presence of Jesus those other guests of Simon, the Pharisee, could have come to realize this sad state of affairs: We have just enough religion to make us hate, but not enough to make us love one another. It doesn't look like they realized what state of affairs they were in.

Jonathan Swift, of course, was not contemplating that dinner at Simon's house. He was thinking of that seemingly endless fighting among the Christians themselves in the centuries after Reformation.

It is a witty remark by an 18<sup>th</sup> century satirist – and at the same time it is a deep insight, originating from the gospel itself. It applies to "Dinner at Simon's place", it applies to some very dark chapters of the history of Christianity. It seems to be a trait of human nature lurking in the background all the time.

If we look at the world of our days, it is hard not to think of Islam. Obviously, for some there is enough religion to hate everybody, but not enough to make them love their fellowmen. If it were my task to engage in dialog with Muslims, I wouldn't want to stoke the fire and march toward a clash of cultures. On the contrary. But I would like to know, if they have in their tradition some point, where this kind of self-criticism originates in the centre of religion itself. Is there in their tradition perhaps also a point of departure, from where to start in order to turn down the religious fever and, perhaps, even open up to enlightened reason? Could turning down the religious fever be the start of true belief?

“We have just enough religion to make us hate, but not enough to make us love one another.” If we look at today's lesson from the gospel in this perspective, it doesn't resemble a statue high up on a column. It is at eyelevel with us, asking us – encouraging us. If we could truly forget about ourselves and just come openhearted to our Lord, we might in the end be told: “Your sins are forgiven... your faith has saved you; go in peace” – enough religion to love one another.

Amen.

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quotations from:

G.H.Hardy, A Mathematician's Apology, Cambr.2005, p.153

Jonathan Swift, Thoughts on Various Subjects (Miscellanies 1711-26); <http://etext.library.adelaide.edu.au/s/swift/jonathan>