

Rev. Dr. Yugo Suzuki's Sermon

6/13/10 **When Does the Bad News Become the Good News? Luke 7: 36-50**

In this morning's scripture lesson, the lives of one man and one woman are the focus of our attention. One is a Pharisee named Simon. The other is a nameless "sinful" woman.

Simon the Pharisee knew all the religious laws and faithfully practiced them. He was an intellectual and financially well off. He knew he was respected and respectable.

The woman was diametrically opposite to him. The adjective "sinful" indicates that she was a prostitute. She was worthless and unclean. And she knew it.

The episode begins with Jesus entering Simon's house as a dinner guest. To everyone's shock, this sinful woman rushed into the dining room. Weeping, she wiped Jesus' feet with her tears and anointed them with fragrant oil.

Now Simon was indignant. But his indignation was aimed at Jesus. Why does this rabbi allow this filthy woman to touch him?

Sensing Simon's seething anger, Jesus told him a parable. There are two men who have accumulated a staggering amount of debt. One owed half a million dollars. The other owed one million dollars. There was no way they could pay it back. So the generous creditor cancelled the entire debt for both of them.

Now which one of them would love the creditor more? Simon answered, "Of course, the one who owed a million dollars."

What Jesus meant was obvious. Simon was so convinced of his righteousness that he did not feel the need of forgiveness. Unable to feel this need, he could not forgive others.

The sinful woman, on the other hand, was different. Her repentance was genuine and pure. So she received forgiveness.

This episode reveals that we often behave like Simon the Pharisee. We are proud of our own righteousness and claim our own goodness over others. But there is arrogance and disingenuousness in such a claim. Jesus reveals our arrogance and disingenuousness for what they are.

When I was a student at Duke University, the family of a friend of mine took me to the top of the Empire State Building.

From its height, all the high-rise buildings looked rather low and insignificant. People down below looked so small that they reminded me of little specks.

Next day, I flew back to North Carolina from LaGuardia. From my window, I had a glimpse of the Empire State Building. I was surprised that from the air, the highest building in the world looked rather small and insignificant.

Our goodness is like the Empire State Building glimpsed from the air. Under the scrutinizing eyes of Jesus, it is impossible for us to boast of our own goodness without shaming ourselves.

Jesus reveals our unwillingness to admit that we need forgiveness for what it is. That is the bad news. But when we repent and ask for forgiveness, we, like the sinful woman, receive complete forgiveness. That is when the bad news turns into the good news.

There is one more point that we need to understand. Luke does not tell us if Simon continued to insist on his own goodness or eventually repented the hardness of his heart.

That means that the problem is left with the reader. We are to put our own conclusion at the end of this episode; we are to do so daily.

Jesus continues to persuade us. His coaxing never ceases. He never gives up on us. That is the ultimate good news for us all.

Thanks be to God.