

**Women in the Church: Agents of Forgiveness, Gratitude and Love**  
**11<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time Homily**  
**June 11-12, 2016**  
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About a month ago, the hot topic of discussion across the Catholic world was Pope Francis' announcement concerning women and the diaconate. According the Catholic News Agency he said that he would, "be open to the idea of forming a commission to study the historical context of female diaconate, as well as the possibility of women serving as deacons today." Now don't get too excited about this yet: we all know that the Vatican moves at glacial speeds, so nothing is going to come of this for several years. But Pope Francis openness to this study is a step in the right direction. Now please don't call the bishop and tell him, "Deacon John said women should be ordained as priests". I didn't say that. But I do believe that there is good reason and historical precedent for women to serve as deacons. So let's pray that this commission is established sooner rather than later, and that it moves to bless the entire church with the gift of women as deacons.

So why am I bringing this up now? St. Luke made me do it! Throughout his gospel narrative, including today's reading, Luke repeatedly shows us that women are involved in Jesus life and in the earliest days of the church. One commentary that I read reminded me that early in his gospel Luke portrays Mary, Elizabeth and Anna as strong women who follow God's plan and give voice to the arrival of Jesus. Luke also uses a literary device of pairing stories of women alongside those of men; the curing of the centurion's slave is followed by the raising the widow's son from the dead; a woman loses a coin and a man loses a sheep. So throughout Luke's gospel, women are prominent. Some of the important women in Jesus early ministry are named in the last verses of today's gospel. In addition to Mary Magdalene, this gospel also names Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward, and Susanna as primary benefactors who provided for the needs of Jesus and his disciples out of their personal resources. Although God could have chosen other ways to provide for the needs of the early church, he chose to use the presence and the generosity of these women as well as others who are unnamed.

And speaking of unnamed women, the focus of today's gospel is a woman who showed up uninvited at a dinner that was hosted by a prominent Pharisee named Simon. Simon must have been a man of considerable wealth to have hosted a dinner that seems to have included many people. It's easy for us to sit in judgement of the Pharisees, isn't it? They're not portrayed in flattering ways in any of the gospels and they're typically seen as Jesus primary antagonists. But I would posit that Simon is a man of faith who sees some potential in Jesus. Jesus reputation as a teacher and miracle worker was spreading throughout the land, so Simon must have felt compelled to take the measure of Jesus for himself. So he invited him to dinner.

When this unnamed woman crashed the party and appeared at Jesus feet, washing them with her tears and drying them with her hair, Simon started to have doubts about his guest. "If this Jesus were really a prophet," he thinks, "he wouldn't let this sinful woman even touch him." Jesus is aware of Simon's thoughts and leads him into an exercise of self-discovery with a parable. Surely one who is forgiven a very large debt will love the creditor more than the one who is forgiven a much smaller debt. And then Jesus uses this woman to teach Simon, and all of us, lessons of repentance, forgiveness, gratitude and love.

When Jesus asks Simon, "Do you see this woman?", he isn't asking him if he can physically see her in front of him. Of course he can! Jesus is asking Simon if he can see this person as more than just the sum of her reputation; can he recognize her as a child of God? Most scholars agree that this woman must have encountered Jesus some time before this dinner. The circumstances of that encounter are not recorded, but in it she must have come to an acknowledgement of her sins, she repented of them and was thankful for God's mercy and forgiveness. And in her gratitude, she expresses a love for Jesus that was beyond Simon's understanding. Her tears are not tears of sorrow; they are profuse tears of overwhelming joy that wash Jesus feet. In her great love, she kisses Jesus feet and anoints them. Simon didn't get it. He didn't see her, he only saw her reputation as a sinner.

So how does this apply to each of us? I think there are two questions that we need to ask ourselves. The first question we should ask ourselves is, "Am I like Simon?" Do I judge others, especially the homeless, the hungry or the immigrant, based on their

appearances, or do I see them beyond their circumstances? Do I genuinely see them as the children of God that they are? And if I recognize them as brothers and sisters, what do I do to help them in their trials?

The second question we need to consider is whether or not we are thankful for God's immeasurable forgiveness, and if we are, how do we demonstrate that gratitude? Jesus said that this woman's "many sins have been forgiven because she has shown great love." Do we regularly avail ourselves of God's forgiveness in the Sacrament of Reconciliation? And when we are given absolution, does it transform us into grateful people filled with love?

Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Susanna were among Jesus' earliest disciples. Because of their love for Jesus, they supported his mission and many others came to discipleship, including the woman in today's gospel. While no one knows if women will be admitted to serve as deacons by the Church, we know that they will never be anonymous in the life of the church. Like the woman in today's gospel, so many women in today's church are primary examples of forgiveness, gratitude and love. We need to see them for the disciples that they are, accept their gifts and learn the lessons that their lives teach us.