

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts**
Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on June 13, 2010 (Proper 6, Year C)

Simon the Pharisee was the model of societal decorum. He belonged to the right religion, he was a member of the right clubs, he associated with the right people; he was wealthy, a pillar of the community, a role model of respectability. You might well wonder why he invited Jesus to his home for a dinner party. Itinerant preachers tend to stick out at such affairs. But it was a social coup for Simon to host the renowned and infamous Jesus. It would be like Mick Jagger showing up at your Fourth of July party. People would be impressed even if they didn't approve of his loud and raunchy rock 'n roll music.

But you didn't really expect Jesus to just blend into the scene did you? Have a few hors d'oeuvres, engage in some small talk, and call it a night? That's not really his style. And he gets his chance to make a larger point when a woman, a "sinner" as Simon points out, starts making a big, disruptive fuss over him. She was decidedly *not* on the guest list. And there's no doubt that her actions would stick out at a fancy dinner party. She shows up lugging a big alabaster jar full of ointment, anoints Jesus' feet with her tears, dries the tears from his feet with her hair, kisses his feet, and then anoints them with the ointment. Odd social behavior at best.

But here's where Simon gets into trouble: he makes a number of false assumptions. We glimpse them through the interior monologue as he gives the silent play-by-play of the unfolding scene. Simon's assumptions are manifold: he assumes that Jesus is not who he says he is; he assumes that this woman is an unredeemable sinner; he assumes that he, as a powerful and respected man and the host of this gathering, is the one in control of the situation. And he is wrong on each and every point. Jesus is not only a prophet but more than a prophet; Jesus indeed has the ability even to forgive sins; and it is Jesus who is most assuredly in complete control of this scene.

Now, you can't really blame Simon for his assumptions – they're all reasonable ones. Simon makes assumptions; we make assumptions; Jesus challenges our assumptions. That's how the general pattern goes. And we make assumptions precisely in order to control the world around us. They offer us comfort; they give us safety in the face of uncertainty. But they're often false.

And there's a fine line between an assumption and a snap judgment. I know because I'm excellent at making snap judgments. I can walk into a room, stare at people, and make grand assumptions with the best of them. "Jerk, idiot, wimp, loser; he's a lawyer, she's a stay-at-home mom, that kid's a handful, he's got issues with his mother, she spends more on pedicures in a given year than she gives to charitable causes." It's really quite a gift. Except for the fact that I'm almost always wrong. *Almost* always wrong.

In order to reframe these assumptions for Simon and his respectable guests – presumably including a high percentage of fellow Pharisees – Jesus does what he often does in such situations: he tells a parable. He tells them about two debtors, one of whom owed his creditor a

small sum and the other a huge amount of money. He asks them which one would be most grateful if the creditor canceled the debt. The obvious answer is the one who owed him a boatload of money. Actually Jesus doesn't use the word "grateful" he uses the word "love." This highlights the point that he's really talking about God and the forgiveness of sin. You might not "love" the friend who forgave you the debt of a cup of coffee at Starbucks. But you would surely love God for forgiving your greatest sin.

That's what Jesus is talking about. And so the woman's actions were not inappropriate, as Simon and his guests had assumed, but were rather acts of great love toward God for the forgiveness of her sins. Simon couldn't relate to the woman's outward display of affection partly because it would have breached the social norms of respectability. Remember, Simon was nothing if not a respectable member of society.

And so this passage begs the question – to what lengths do *you* go to maintain your respectability? To varying degrees we all put a lot of effort into this. We spend a tremendous amount of money each year on the right houses, the right cars, the right clothes, the right grooming products. How many of you would show up to work with a hole in your trousers? Would you go to a dinner party without make-up? Would you drive around town with a giant rusted out dent in the hood of your car?

A generation or two ago the Episcopal Church was the poster child for respectability. It was only *half*-jokingly referred to as "The Republican Party at prayer." Someone told me the Hingham Yacht Club used to be referred to as "St. John's by-the-Sea." And that the church was known around town as "The Chill on the Hill." The underlying assumptions here – that Episcopalians are all wealthy and conservative and white and more concerned with keeping up appearances than engaging their faith – have themselves proven false. Today the church nationally is a model of diversity racially, ethnically, socioeconomically, and liturgically. Less so in our own community perhaps. But we make up for it to a degree by shattering the stereotype of an aging, shrinking, and dying church. We are alive, vibrant, committed, and forget the "Chill on the Hill" – there's a whole lot of thawing going on around here. Which is exciting and energizing and challenging and fun but it isn't always consistent with respectability. And that's okay.

By the time this gospel story ends Simon's respectability and our assumptions are still being challenged. We might think we know what ultimately happens to Simon – that the public shame regarding his lack of hospitality kindles his anger against Jesus and that at that very moment he pledges to work with the religious elite to bring Jesus' ministry to an end. But we don't really know. Other well-known and respected Pharisees, Nicodemus foremost among them, came to see Jesus as the Messiah. Perhaps this encounter changed the life not just of the woman who knelt at Jesus' feet that evening but Simon's as well.

If we put aside our assumptions and snap judgments we come to see that the only assumption Jesus makes about all of us is that we are sinners in desperate need of forgiveness.