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Humility and Faith

Luke 7:50

The sociologist Hans Mol has observed an unexpected relationship between affluence and happiness. He describes it this way:

Our society...does not seem to hang together as well as some of us... remember from the past...in spite of our increasingly higher standard of living. Yet our material improvements do not seem to have any effect on our serenity, our peace of mind, our integrity. If anything the reverse seems to be true: the better off we are financially, the worse our sense of happiness and tranquility appears to become (*Calvin for the Third Millennium*, page 95).

In the 21st chapter of 1 Kings we are introduced to a man who is exceedingly wealthy and powerful, yet profoundly unhappy. King Ahab has been wintering in the valley of Jezreel. He decides that his winter place is not spacious enough. He wants to do a major addition. But there is a problem. He needs the adjacent property but it is not available. His next door neighbor is a man named Naboth who is not a winter tourist. Naboth's family has lived in this valley for generations. This is the only home he has ever had. The vineyard that Ahab wants has been nurtured by Naboth's ancestors. It is his legacy. It connects him to generations past. It is not something that Naboth can sell or trade. He knows he is accountable to God for the gift he has received. When Naboth refuses to sell off his inheritance, Ahab goes home and sulks. He does not understand a man who refuses to compromise his integrity.

In the end Ahab uses his wealth and abuses his power to get what he wants. A conspiracy is formed against Naboth. He is isolated and condemned and then beaten to death by a mob. Ahab's winter home expansion moves ahead without a hitch. But Ahab is no better off than he was before. His arrogance has been served but his life is more empty than ever as the judgment of God closes in.

Jesus makes a similar observation in the seventh chapter of Luke's gospel. There Jesus is approached by a man of wealth and power. Simon the Pharisee invites Jesus to a gathering in his home but he does not extend to Jesus the usual courtesies a guest would receive from a gracious host. Simon apparently wants to put this quaint small town rabbi on display for his more sophisticated guests. It may be that Jesus is supposed to be part of the entertainment for the evening.

The entertainment value that Jesus brings turns out to be even better than anticipated when a woman crashes the party and washes Jesus' feet with her hair. This is a woman who has no standing in the community. She is in fact well known for living an immoral life. Simon's contemptuous reference to her suggests that she may have been a prostitute. Because everyone knows about this woman's reputation Jesus is on the spot to explain her presence and why he has allowed her to touch him. Simon believes a true prophet would never permit himself to be defiled by such a woman.

Jesus tells a story which exposes Simon's pretensions as a man who believes in his own goodness and his own social standing. Simon is so secure in his position that he doesn't have to worry about being a good host. Like Ahab he thinks he is above the rules that apply to everyone else.

We know a lot about that kind of arrogance. It took over Wall Street a few years ago and it almost destroyed our economy. Millions of jobs have been lost and we wonder if they will ever come back. We have seen this arrogance in the board rooms of corporations where the extreme emphasis on profits leaves no room to consider the common good. This has led to the worst ecological disaster our nation has ever seen. We wonder if the Gulf of Mexico will ever recover. The suffering of Naboth is all around us.

Jesus understands that suffering. That is why he points to the glaring contrast between the arrogance of Simon and the humility of the woman who has come to wash his feet. The immoral woman long ago learned that she could not depend on her goodness or her social position. She understands that she lives in dependence on God's grace. Her relationship with God, which is grounded in faith, has delivered her from emptiness and despair. Jesus says to her, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace (Luke 7:50)."

The relationship between humility and faith is vividly demonstrated in times of testing. There were 500 young men from Sangamon County who died in the Civil War. Twenty-three of them perished while prisoners of war at Andersonville, Georgia. This huge camp of 30,000 Union prisoners registered about 100 deaths every day.

Among the Sangamon County prisoners who survived that prison, four were convinced that they owed their lives to God. In August of 1864 they were sick and delirious. Their only water supply came from a creek polluted by the waste generated by Confederate guards living upstream. But during these darkest days of their confinement something unbelievable happened. Before their very eyes a spring of pure water erupted in the center of the camp. That spring saved their lives. Believing that it was a sign of God's gracious presence in that terrible place they named it "Providence Spring (John Mack Faragher, *Sugar Creek: Life on the Illinois Prairie*, pages 225-228)."

When these men came home they told this story in churches and revival gatherings. This experience made clear to them that their lives did not depend on wealth or power or goodness or social position. In Andersonville all those things had been stripped away. When they returned, they were men of humility and faith. They knew that they lived in dependence on the grace of God. By that faith we are indeed saved.