

"An Attitude of Gratitude: The Law of Receptivity"
Luke 7:36-50
11/18/12

What has your week been like? This has been kind of a unique week for me. I helped lead worship here on Sunday at the 9:00 service and taught the Inquirers Class at 10:30. That afternoon I drove solo to Greensburg for a visitation for one of our ZPC families. I returned home in time for Laura and me to walk down the street to dinner with two other couples. We've had in mind that we should get together for, well, several years. It was pure joy to finally do so. Monday and Tuesday were freighted heavily with preparation time. I wrote a draft of this message. I developed plans for how I would lead my part of a retreat my small group was going to take Friday and Saturday. I was so glad that all of that writing and planning was pretty much done by Tuesday evening.

On Wednesday, I joined other members of our Session as we met with the group of pastors and elders in our presbytery who watch over the health and welfare of churches and pastors in this part of the state. This Committee on Ministry invited us to join them in conversation about the two tracks we have followed recently: our search for a new pastor and our assessment of denominational affiliation. Your elders did a great job of sharing openly, clearly and honestly. We received notice the next day that the church could continue to the next step of electing a search committee and drafting the forms that basically serves as our church resume and position description for senior pastor. This is great news!

By the time we received that news, I was already many hours into a retreat our staff took starting Wednesday at lunch and ending Thursday afternoon. We have an incredible staff. I love these brothers and sisters deeply. Our time included eating, praying, games, reflection, conversation, bible study and planning and time together with session members who could join us for a meal and sharing. Then, on Friday I left for the overnight retreat with the group of guys I've been blessed to be part of for the last year and a half. It was a special time.

In the midst of all of these items, I also checked on some folks about pastoral needs, answered some emails, spent time with Laura and began to gear up for this week's Thanksgiving holiday that will find me with thirty-six members of Laura's side of the family gathered on their south western Illinois farmland. Our elder son and his wife and two boys will join us from their new home in Texas, and our younger son and the love of his life will join us from Seattle. They have been a couple for over a year, and this is our opportunity to finally meet her in person.

So, what has your week been like? Just take a moment to consider that question.

We all have come through these past days to just this point in time when we get to turn our attention to God's written word. We know in about a half hour we will stand up and walk out of this worship space and step into the week ahead. A long time ago, a small group of folks find themselves in the same room. They come out of all that had come before. They are on their way into the days to follow. At just this point, their lives intersect. Let's step into their story.

Turn with me in your bibles or the bibles we have placed under chairs around you to Luke chapter seven. As you find that place in the fourth book of the New Testament, let me help us note what Jesus' week has been like. He has been in the early months of training his apprentices, his disciples. He has taught large crowds about the true ways of God. In that teaching, Jesus reveals that the way to God is not through accustomed living but counter-custom living. It is a radical, turn-the-world-upside-down way of being. One way to summarize

his message is that right relationship with God and others is not about outward appearance but inward heart.

Scan chapter seven with me to see what else happens in the days just preceding the event at which we will look in just a moment. You will see the account of a Roman gentile whose heart is renovated to belief in Jesus. Look at verse nine: Jesus says, "I have not found such great faith even in Israel." He goes to Nain and raises a man from the dead. The amazing details of that event cause the villagers to say in verse sixteen, "A great prophet has appeared among us. God has come to help his people." In a conversation with John the immerser's disciples, Jesus says that people who believe they are the most undeserving before God are actually the greatest in God's eyes.

Then comes our text for the morning, starting in chapter seven, verse thirty-six. Follow along as I read. Remember, this is God's holy word. [Read Luke 7:36-50.] Whenever we read God's word, he intends that we would gain understanding by his Spirit. I pray that is true for each of us this morning. You are going to want to keep your bibles open and follow along carefully this morning.

Scientific laws are statements based on careful observation that "explain, in concise terms, an action or set of actions." "Scientific laws must be simple, true, universal, and absolute. They represent the cornerstone of scientific discovery, because if a law ever did not apply, then all science based upon that law would collapse." Some of these laws are the law of gravity, Newton's laws of motion, the laws of thermodynamics, Boyle's law of gases, the law of conservation of mass and energy, and Hook's law of elasticity.

With our national Thanksgiving holiday coming up this week, I want to put in front of you a possible law based on my own observations. It is simple, it is true but I need to have you help me determine if it meets the other two required criteria. Is it also universal and absolute? I call it the "Law of Receptivity". Here it is: the Law of Receptivity states, "the ability to give thanks is directly proportional to the ability to receive with a thankful heart". Let me repeat that: the ability to give thanks is directly proportional to the ability to receive with a thankful heart. Thanksgiving wells up in the hearts of those who know we have reason to be thankful. If I am someone who rarely, if ever, takes note of good that has come my way, I will not be a very thankful person; receptive hearts well up with thanks; unreceptive hearts stifle thanks.

Our daughter-in-law, our one precious daughter, has begun to help our three and five year old grandsons with this law. Tisha refers to our grandsons as her "mini-men". While she knows they are just young boys, she keeps her eye on the horizon and relates to them as young men, men being shaped before her eyes and under her guidance. She refers to them in her blog as "mini-men". It's a big concept. When Jackson and Tucker are taken with moments of ingratitude, Tisha steers them to its opposite. She writes, "When I put their plates down in front of them at the table, they [sometimes] immediately point out what they don't like. Then, I'll have them find and [name] all the things they are thankful for. It shows they are thankful for and like five things and only dislike one. So, they redirect and see how much there is to be thankful for." She affirms the Law of Receptivity. Won't you read it out loud with me? The ability to give thanks is directly proportional to the ability to receive with a thankful heart. And here's the question before us this morning: do we have receptive hearts?

We have three characters here. Jesus is the main character. Everything revolves around him. He is a rabbi who says and does things like no other rabbi. We also know he is the son of God, the messiah, the promised one of Israel for the sake of the whole world. That's still up for grabs here. In fact, I would say that the primary reason he is invited to dinner is so that the host can check him out in a more intimate setting than out among the crowds.

His host, the second character, is named Simon. His name means "hearing". He is a Pharisee. The basic belief of the Pharisees is that God only cares for righteous people, people who keep the law. This story assumes that Simon has heard Jesus in recent days, likely including this very day, and wants to hear more. The whole story indicates he wants to verify his doubts about his teaching, seek to influence this young rabbi, and if he can't, emphatically point out his errors. This isn't said plainly in Luke's dialogue, but stay with me. What happens says everything.

Our third character is an unnamed woman. In verse thirty-seven, we have her biography in one phrase: "a woman in that town who lived a sinful life." Ken Bailey acknowledges that "The natural and nearly universal assumption is that she was a prostitute." Luke chooses to focus on the character of her life not some designation of her. I think he does this because he knows that is what Jesus did. He is not interested in titles. He is interested in people. This is a woman who is the penultimate failure in the eyes of Jewish society not just in the eyes of the Pharisee. She was as far from God as possible.

We first focus on Jesus. He is invited guest. He is invited guest of honor. He is invited scholar/teacher. All honor should be afforded him including: (1) a kiss of greeting, usually on the face; (2) a seat on a stool where his feet and hands would be washed with olive oil, a servant would pour water over his hands and feet and a grace would be said; (3) a place to recline for the meal with the number one guest receiving the place of honor.

We next focus on Simon. Bound by the law and intent on keeping it, he is to make sure it is carried out completely. Shockingly, He provides none of these acts of hospitality. Not one. Jesus could have simply walked out, giving clear demonstration that he had every reason to be appalled at his reception or the lack of it. But, he stays. In fact, he decides to do something equally audacious in response to how Simon has insulted him. He goes to the arranged benches and reclines in the place reserved for the oldest person. It was the privilege of the host to offer this spot. Jesus took it. In all likelihood, he was not the oldest person at his dinner. He was quite likely the youngest, but he takes the position of the eldest. It would be evident to the host and anyone else who might have been present that Jesus took this place to show that he indeed noticed the amazing lack of hospitality. Simon's heart is hard. His heart's receptivity to the real blessing of Jesus' presence is nil.

We next focus on the woman. Like Simon, this story assumes that the woman has already encountered Jesus. She has heard his message of the invitation to the upside down, counter-expectations and reversed norms. She has heard that she, a sinner in the eyes of religious law keepers like Simon, is loved by God. The Pharisees believe that law keepers are loved by God. Jesus says sinners are loved by God. And this woman has not only heard that message but received it as her own. While Simon heard it and did not receive it, she heard it and received it with all her heart. There can be no other explanation that fits what she does.

People from the village would be welcome to come to a house where an esteemed person is being hosted. She has come with great purpose. Referring to an Eleventh Century Arab Christian commentary on this event, one writer affirms, "Overwhelmed with joy she was eager to show her gratitude to this good man who had set her free." She arrives with expensive perfume to anoint his head. Knowing proper custom, she planned to do this anointing when Jesus sat to wash to be ceremonially clean for the meal. But, Simon's unreceptive slights have created a very awkward situation. She cannot get to him in a fitting way, and She has seen how the hard hearted host insulted the one who gave her life. She begins to weep.

You see, I believe by this point, that Ken Bailey is right, her tears are now tears of gratitude and tears of heartbreak. Like everyone else in the room, this woman knows what Simon has done. She is grief stricken over Simon's closed, mean, unreceptive heart exhibited by how he treats the one who has saved her. With her heart breaking at the injustice of it all, she steps forward. She can no longer get to his head but she can get to his feet. She, an outcast sinner, kisses Jesus' feet to make up for the kiss that should have been his from his host. She cannot ask for water since as a woman she cannot speak and would be ignored or thrown out if she did. She lets her streaming tears fall on Jesus' feet. She can't ask for a towel, so she lets down her hair to dry his feet. It was forbidden for man and woman to touch. It was forbidden for a woman to let her hair down to anyone but her husband in their bed chamber. But, she does this for Jesus, exhibiting the deepest connection with him, an "ultimate pledge of loyalty."

Simon must have been apoplectic! Where he had carefully planned his control over Jesus this woman has just created chaos of immense proportions. Simon would have fully expected this young rabbi to set things back in their proper order by giving Simon the word to throw her out and condemning her for her actions. And so the spotlight shines on Jesus. But, he accepts her gestures. He felt her compassion for his suffering. He accepts her extravagant gestures of gratitude. He knows her heart. He knows she has received God's blessing through him.

This is driven home for Simon by Jesus who now turns to full chastisement. "I have something to say to you," carries the same tone we would expect even in our culture. You've blown it. Listen to me. Jesus tells a parable. Look at verse forty-one. [Read Luke 7:41-42.] In my words Jesus asks, "Who is going to be most thankful?" And Simon's kind of squirming in his seat, half-hearted answer is, "The one who is most receptive to that blessing."

And, Jesus says, "That's right. This woman's loving devotion to me proves she has received something deeply, her forgiveness. You, Simon, by your utter lack of honor to me, you have proven your complete lack of receptivity to me, to your need before God, to your hard hearted denial of all that is God. You show you do not know the love of God and that you have not been forgiven."

Simon and the woman are the same, though they do not know it. They both are made in the image of God. Both are worthy of God's love. Both have heard Jesus. Both have made a response. Simon's response is like this bowl. In this position it cannot receive even a drop of blessing that is poured out on it. But, turned upside down, it can receive not just a drop but all of the blessing that flows. Which bowl is truly receptive? It is the one that is turned up to eagerly collect all the good intentions of the pourer. Which type of person are you? Are you a Simon, unreceptive to the good that God has brought you? Or, are you like this woman, fully receptive and responsive to the blessings of God?

So, is my Law of Receptivity a true law? Let me state it one more time: The ability to give thanks is directly proportional to the ability to receive with a thankful heart. Does it meet the criteria? Is it simple, true, universal and absolute? Whether you judge my adage as law worthy or not, the most important question this morning is, "Do we have receptive hearts?" The proof lies in how thankful we truly are.

I was raised by good southern parents. One of the very first instructions I remember receiving from my mom and dad came in the form of a question when someone gave me something or did something for me. One of them would immediately ask me, "What do you say?" The correct response was, of course, "Thank you." This went a long way toward helping me know that I needed to have a receptive heart.

Let's take a few moments to ask God to forgive us for our lack of receptivity wherever we are like Simon. Let's ask God to give us fully receptive hearts like the woman.