

The Third Sunday after Pentecost
Year C Proper 6
Luke 7: 36 – 8:3
June 13, 2010

In the name of one God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Not sure how many of you have World Cup fever, but I imagine most of you can at least understand why the rest of the world is going soccer crazy this month. Most other countries live and breathe this sport much like our parish lives and breathes Strawberries the second weekend in June. People come together in preparation and celebration; some come to work and some come to party. Everyone goes home satisfied.

This is only the fourth World Cup I have paid any attention to. I first got excited about soccer when I lived in Johannesburg. It was impossible not to fall in love with the excitement of the game when your first experience ever watching a game live is...at a World Cup qualifying match...in a stadium with a 100,000 other people...when the home team wins big!

After an electrifying 90 minutes of soccer, South Africa defeated the team from Congo with just one goal. The significance for the players from South Africa and their entire country was felt immediately. Everyone in the country rushed out of their homes and into the streets – celebrating well into the night.

South Africa would be going to the World Cup for the first time in its history!

Though it was a land of soccer lovers, the country had never been able to enter the tournament due to the international sanctions in place during the apartheid era. When I saw this game in 1997, it had only been three years since the first democratic elections were held in South Africa.

For so long the country had been imprisoned by fear and hate, impoverished by greed and violence, and been subject to the world's condemnation. The corrupt and racist apartheid system needed to be toppled and I believe the international community was right to impose sanctions.

Yet, though the good far outweighed the bad, one of the effects of the sanctions was that the sin of apartheid became South Africa's only identity marker. The whole world was repulsed by their policies, and the country was marginalized alongside other states with despicable government policies.

Now 16 years after the first democratic election and 12 years after they played in their first World Cup match in France, South Africa is hosting the World Cup and many of us are watching as the tournament is played in Africa for the first time ever. It is a historic occasion and one in which South Africa and its soccer team has taken its place on the international stage and is being watched by people around the world.

The country still has its problems – poverty and violence still plague too many of their communities - but you cannot help but feel the spirit of hope and redemption pulsating through their hearts when you encounter a South African here or abroad. Their spirit is palpable. It is tangible. It pours out of them.

It is the same spirit of hope and redemption we see demonstrated in the Gospel reading.

All we know about the woman in today's Gospel story is that she is a sinner. That is her only identity marker - *sinner*. She is not a daughter, not a sister, not a wife, not a mother, not a follower, just a sinner...accused and marginalized.

Until one day she encounters God's love.

We don't know if she had met Jesus previous to her encounter in Simon's house or if she had encountered one of his followers. All we know is that she felt forgiven by God and that she wants to illustrate her gratitude. She recognizes the divine in Jesus and seeks him out. It is a reversal of the usual story – here we have the lost sheep seeking her shepherd.

What it must have taken for this woman to find the courage to leave her place on the margins of society and come to the center of power and to the dining room of a well known religious leader! This was a man who with others like him had defined the margins from which she came.

I imagine her journey was terribly frightening for her and, at the same time, largely uneventful; she likely slipped by unnoticed and unrecognized by the people she passed along the way.

People tend not to want to see some kinds of people; and they tend to look away if they see them at all.

So the woman gets all the way into the home of Simon the Pharisee without being seen.

It is not until she is at Jesus' feet weeping, that Simon notices her and even then he doesn't *acknowledge* her. He just thinks to himself that Jesus should have known what kind of woman was touching him – a sinner.

When Simon looks in her direction all he sees is a sinner.

Jesus sees something else.

Jesus says to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment."

In God's Kingdom, as seen in Simon's dining room, the tables are turned. Jesus shines the light on the woman who has shown great love and gratitude. He calls Simon out on his lack of hospitality.

To be sure, in God's Kingdom there is forgiveness for Simon, there is love and there is redemption.

But there is also a great sadness when these gifts are offered and ignored.

And there is a greater sadness when the people who can help us recognize these gifts and can help bring us to them are marginalized and passed over.

When I was living in South Africa, I did more than learn to love soccer. There was so much about the country and its people that I came to love and appreciate – from their hospitality to their music; to their mountains and their languages.

When I first arrived in the country I took Zulu lessons from a very patient professor at the local university. One of the first things I learned to say - and about all I was able to master - was *hello*. Or, as they say, *Sawbona*.

Sawbona. The word translates more specifically to "I see you."

What a wonderful greeting!

If only we could all greet each other this way...and mean it.

I see you. I acknowledge your existence and your dignity. I acknowledge what you can show me about myself. I acknowledge what you can teach me about God.

Jesus asks Simon: Do you see this woman?

Do you really see her? Take a moment and look at her. She is courage. Compassion. Gratitude. Love.

She is a sinner. Yes. As are you, Simon. And she is forgiven, as you can be.

She accepted her imperfection, her greed, her indifference and gave that over to God to transform.

Lord knows it is hard to acknowledge these things, to see our shortcomings and to give them over to God.

But this woman had the faith that her sinfulness wasn't who she was.

She had the faith to know that she need not walk in the shadows, on the margins of society, eyes cast down.

Somehow she had the faith to know that she would not only be forgiven by God, but that through this forgiveness she would feel truly loved and accepted by God and free to leave the margins of her community.

We too are free to leave the margins – those of us who are sent to the margins and those of us who go there willingly. We too can take the courageous journey to the dinner table where Jesus sits.

When I watch the World Cup as it is played in South Africa, I am transported back to the year I lived there.

I never fully understood how there could be so much pain and so much hope living side by side in that country.

But now I see the triumph and pride in that country as they host the World Cup and show hospitality to the rest of the world. They know what it is like to be marginalized. And they know what it is like to marginalize their own people. But they also know what it is like to forgive and be forgiven.

The gifts - forgiveness, acceptance, love - are on the table available for all. It is a great sadness when we cannot accept them and when we ignore the very people who can help bring us to the table where they wait for us.

There is great joy, however, when we recognize that a few simple words – if we let them shape our interactions with one another – if we say them to ourselves and if we say them to one another - can help us live our lives as Christ intends.

Hello. Sawbona.

I see you.

I see you. I acknowledge your existence and your dignity. I acknowledge what you can teach me about God.

Hello. I see you.

Amen.