

About 15 years ago, I watched an incredibly poignant movie entitled, *The Spitfire Grill*. It's a story about Percy Talbot who has recently been released from prison after serving a sentence for manslaughter. While working at the Maine tourist office in prison, Percy decides that when her time was served she would like to start her new life in Gilead, Maine. In the Bible, Gilead is noted for the soothing "balm" or ointment gleaned from its trees, east of the Jordan River. One of the hopes for modern Gilead is that a similar healing substance has been discovered in the forests of the region that had been thought useless. The Biblical Gilead was also a refuge for fugitives.

When Percy is released, the warden makes arrangements with the sheriff in Gilead to help her find a job and a place to live. In one of the opening scenes of the film, a young woman steps down from a bus, onto the streets of this tiny New England town called "Gilead." It's night, and there is snow on the ground. The woman is bundled up in layers of heavy clothes; her bangs hang down in her face; she carries all her belongings in one suitcase. She is looking for a place to stay.

As the woman's figure moves along the main street of town, townspeople sitting near their windows look up from their television sets in alarm. Strangers don't often come to the town of Gilead. What is she doing here, in the dead of winter, and at this hour? Put her back on the bus, they say to each other. There is nothing for her here.

The townspeople's initial reaction toward this stranger is one of suspicion and hostility. It is a natural human response. Who knows what trouble a stranger may bring? Upon her arrival in town, the sheriff takes Percy to the *Spitfire Grill* and asks Hannah, the cantankerous proprietor, if she would agree to give Percy a job and lodgings. Hannah is hesitant at first, but realizes that in her old age she could use the help. Percy soon settles into life at the grill with Hannah. She works as a waitress in the *Spitfire Grill*, owned by Hannah, whose gruff exterior conceals a kind heart and precious little tolerance for the grill's regular customers, who cast their suspicions on Percy's mysterious past. One of the character's named Nahum looks at the stranger who got off the bus and has only judgment & contempt for her. Today's gospel lesson includes a similar theme of judgment and contempt.

Jesus is a guest at the home of good, religious man, a Pharisee. In Jesus' day, there were no paved roads, no socks, and no running water. So it was an expectation that a host would provide guests with a servant to wash the guests feet on their arrival, and provide some scented ointment for their hair.

The banquet appears to have been offered "Greco/Roman-style." Meals were served on low tables, and the guests would lie on cushions, propped on their left side, taking and eating food from serving dishes with their right hands. Only men would eat together. Women would enter the room only to serve food. They would not talk with the men. And a woman would always have her hair covered, and would never directly speak to or touch a man in public. So, when the woman in this story comes into the room where the men are eating, she is violating a standard of socially respectable behavior just by being in the room.

What she does is shocking. Washing Jesus' feet with her tears. Touching him with her hair. Anointing

him with ointment. But then, she is already a woman with a reputation. She has no "good name" left to lose. In her self-awareness she is drawn to Jesus as one who offers forgiveness and hope, just as Percy is drawn to Gilead, a place of healing and hope. And yet, it becomes quickly clear that she had not been invited. The woman's intrusion provokes a religious and social crisis. She has just barged into the home of a Pharisee, and that Pharisee will consider her impure and unclean. What about Jesus? Any proper man would have re-acted with outrage and anger at her behavior. Any proper man would have absolutely prevented the way she touches him in public. Allowing this behavior tars Jesus with the same reputation as the woman touching him. And if left unchallenged would bring dishonour on the host as well.

The text says, *"Simon said to himself, If Jesus was truly a prophet, he would realize what kind of woman this was. He would know what was inside her heart. He would know what a terrible sinner she was and Jesus would have nothing to do with her."* And Jesus, being a prophet and reading Simon's heart, knew that Simon was filled with self-righteousness. Simon was looking down at this woman. He felt that he was several cuts above this woman.

The story continues. Jesus, looking at the woman, said to Simon, *"Simon, I came into your house and you gave me no water for my feet but she has been bathing my feet with her tears. I came into your house and you did not welcome me with a warm embrace but she has been kissing my feet. I came into your house and you did not give me oil to anoint my hands and feet, but she has been anointing my feet with precious oil."*

Jesus sees her as a child of God. The most important sentence in this text may be the simple question, "Simon, do you see this woman?" Simon, can you look past your preconceptions, your assumptions, your cherished beliefs, your social status, your religious prejudices...and see a child of God? Simon, can you turn off that harsh voice playing in your head, and open your heart to the tenderness of this moment? Simon, can you let grace change your life?

All of this is hard on Simon. He sees in the woman not a child of God but a threat to his goodness. She is someone to avoid. Simon was looking only at the Law, at respectability, at his own moral purity, and he failed to "see this woman," Simon is not a bad man. He is anxious to do right, to be right, but his goodness gets in the way.

Simon the Pharisee, a member of the religious elite is completely clueless about his own need for forgiveness. Unaware of his own need for mercy, he shows none for this woman. He is blind to the fact that he too is broken and in need of grace. He is blind to how he and this woman are connected at the deepest level.

I find it easy to feel compassion and understanding for this so-called sinful woman who is judged by Simon. Part of me doesn't want to relate to Simon the Pharisee, but knows I should. At one time another, most of us, if not every single one of us, fits in Simon's shoes. We fall prey to the things we don't want to be: judgmental, inhospitable, self-righteous, unkind. We will miss the force of this text if we simply cozy up with Jesus and point the finger at Simon. We will get the force of it if we begin to identify with Simon the Pharisee rather than over against him.

No one ever *wants* to admit need, guilt, and brokenness. Only when we've run through every other option, only when our back is to the wall and we're caught between a rock and a hard place.

Why? Because admitting our need, guilt, and brokenness demolishes all of our illusions about self-sufficiency.

Since Eden on, humanity has been plagued by a independent desire to make it on our own, to need no one, not even God.

Simon's story is too often the church's story. And persons like the woman in the story feel it. People who, like her, were drawn to Jesus too often avoid the church today. Phillip Yancey tells the story of a friend of his in Chicago who worked with poor persons in the city. He was visited once by a prostitute who was in dire straits. She was homeless, sick, and unable to buy food for herself or her daughter. Yancey's friend asked if she had thought about going to a church for help, and the woman seemed horrified. "*Church?! Why would I ever go there? I was already feeling terrible about myself. They'd just make me feel worse.*" She had experienced church as a place of judgment and inhospitality. Do you look across the congregation and see a room full of hypocrites? Is there an arrogance in your heart where you magnify the faults of others and minimize your own?

Or are you like this woman who knows her fallibilities and comes to Jesus and says, "I am broken. Please heal me." She didn't let anything hold her back - her reputation, protocol, religious laws - nothing held her back from pouring out her gratitude for having experienced God's forgiveness. Her loving behavior emanates from freedom and grace. Her forgiveness is not as a result of her loving actions. Rather, her loving actions are an expression of forgiveness. Can we let grace change *our* lives, too?

Access - who has it? who recognizes it. For the woman - external barriers, but she broke through. For Simon - internal barriers to recognize the access to Jesus he already had. What does Jesus give to each of the characters? To woman - forgiveness, a voice, a place of welcome, compassion, he sees her. For Simon - validation through acceptance of hospitality.

Emphasis on proper, respectable behavior or unleashing the kingdom of God? Jesus calls us to look at one another, and see into the heart, not at what the world sees. When we see these things about ourselves, and know ourselves as "sinners" in need of God's grace, we can open our hearts to the forgiveness Jesus offers this unnamed woman. We all know indebtedness of one kind or another, and we long for forgiveness and freedom from the burdens we carry. May that longing not only open our hearts to God's love and make us grateful like this unnamed woman: may it also open our eyes to see "this woman," "this man," "this child," each person who comes into our lives, the way Jesus saw them, the way that God sees each one of us today.

Back to the movie: Gilead provides a refuge for Percy. Gilead becomes a haven of hope and healing. A central theme is redemption, but redemption and healing for who? A "twist" of the film is that one initially expects the redemption to primarily be of Percy, but we in fact see other characters and relationships, and indeed the town itself, powerfully redeemed through the actions of Percy. By the time the credits of the film start to roll at the end, the little town of Gilead has been changed.