

Today's readings include two of the best-known Biblical stories – David's pursuit of Bathsheba and the woman who washes Jesus' feet with her tears. They are both stories about changes of heart.

When Nathan utters his famous line, "You are the man," he is saying that David is the man in his parable, the man of selfish/ungenerous heart. The woman who washed Jesus' feet with her tears does this out of a generous, overflowing heart.

Some people talk about the Gospel story as if the woman is forgiven as a result of her love – but that is not what Jesus says. What Jesus explains to the scandalized onlookers is that she loves so profoundly because she has received profound forgiveness. He explains that your heart grows when you receive forgiveness. This woman was indeed a sinful person, as the onlookers claim, lost in sin of whatever sort and cut off from God. The woman described simply as 'a sinner' realizes that God has come to her (and to everyone) in Jesus. She sees and feels her forgiveness and it breaks open her heart. Her response is tears, service, and devotion. She gives herself and the best she has, out of gratitude. She is oblivious to the scorn of others, because she sees only the gift of forgiveness and renewed relationship received in Christ. So she spends her own tears, uses her own long, lovely hair, gives up her own wealth for the costly ointment, all to express her joy, to offer her love in return.

Similarly, King David's heart grows when his terrible sin, of murdering Uriah the Hittite in order to have his wife, has been forgiven. David recognized his failing, recognized that he had not only behaved abominably, but had done so because of an unguarded, unruly heart. David was a greedy and selfish man, who took advantage of the power and privilege he had been granted to grab whatever he wanted, not caring what it cost anyone else.

His prophet and advisor Nathan was able to help him see this with a simple parable. The parable which awoke the King's sympathy for the poor man with his one beloved ewe lamb opened David's heart. He was able to see his own sin, and then to see the infinite grace of God in wiping that sin away. Being lectured about our sinfulness or other sorts of failure helps some of us to find our way to repentance and forgiveness, but for many of us it is the stories that break open our hearts. That is why there is such value in the stories from scripture and tradition, the ones that we hear over and over that burrow deep in our own hearts leading us into the Truth.

The heart of that Truth is that forgiveness of all sinfulness is already accomplished, is offered to everyone through Jesus' self-offering. The forgiveness is there, so why is everyone not a paragon of love and devotion? Why don't we all have hearts broken open and bursting with love? Because we shut ourselves off from it. We do not receive it. If we do allow ourselves to receive God's offered forgiveness, we find ourselves

blessed. Opening our hearts to God's forgiving love opens them to other people, to a life of devotion and service, to become the saints we were made to be.

When we read about saints over the millennia, we find that they often speak of themselves as the worst of sinners. We look at them and think perhaps they have some sort of psychological illness. We can see their holiness, but they seem fixated on their sinfulness, to a degree out of all proportion to what seems warranted. I think that what they see, and we miss, is the boundless forgiveness of God.

They become aware of how far they have fallen short of the glory of God, and yet they experience God's loving closeness. God makes up all the distance between them. So these, most aware of their own sinfulness, their own shortcomings, become fountains of love for God and for the world. It is not that they are psychologically unhealthy, but that they have become aware, at a depth unknown to most of us, of the love of God reaching out to them, washing over them, revealing and healing every tiniest flaw.

This week brought the observance of a favorite early Celtic saint – Columba, the founder of the community of monks on Iona. Columba was born in Ireland in the century after Saint Patrick. He was a very bright child who learned early to read and to love books, as he loved God and loved the whole land and culture of Ireland. His life was filled with joy. His love for God led him to monastic vows and his love for books led him to become a skilled calligrapher, reputedly the greatest of his time. When his good friend Abbot Finnian received a lovely new manuscript, Columba dashed across country to see it. It was beautiful. There was not another like it in all of Ireland. He begged permission to copy it so that he could have it for himself. Finnian refused – so Columba sneaked into the scriptorium in the night to make his own copy. When this was discovered, Finnian confiscated the unauthorized copy and Columba was furious. He demanded his work – and Finnian refused. They took their dispute to the local king, Diarmot, who made the now famous pronouncement, "To every cow it's calf, and to every original it's copy." Columba was furious and went to his father (a neighboring chieftan) to demand soldiers to assert his rights. And so occurred one of the bloodiest battles in Irish history, at which 3000 men died so Columba could have his book.

When he looked around at the carnage, Columba's heart broke. He realized that his greed had brought about all these deaths. He saw his sin clearly before him and determined to be punished. The punishment chosen was exile, that he should never again see the Irish land which he loved with the same passion he had for God and for books. So it was that Columba took twelve of the monks from his monastery and set sail toward Scotland. They stopped at Iona, just far enough that Ireland could not be seen.

On the battlefield at Cooldrevne Columba saw the fruit of his own selfish, greedy heart. His heart was opened by that experience. He had been born with a passionate heart, much like King David. He loved what he loved and wanted what he wanted. But when he experienced the cost of that, his heart changed. He willingly gave up his native land, one of his great loves. And on tiny desolate Iona he experienced the full forgiveness of

God. He did not become less passionate, but his heart was broken open and his love poured out to others. His experience of sin and forgiveness turned his life into a life of devotion and service. Columba and his monks established churches all over the Pictish countryside (in what is now Scotland). And for every church they provided a book. Columba remained one of the greatest scribes of the time, said to have copied one manuscript for each of the men who died at Cooldrevne. Columba's violent and greedy heart was changed forever and the generosity which resulted provided a path to faith for countless people and a place of refuge where people go seeking God even today.

Whether it is in the priest's absolution or in the privacy of our own prayers, however we encounter the face of God forgiving us, accepting us, blessing us, making us whole, let us open ourselves to receive what God offers so that we too can have hearts broken open for the blessing of the world. Amen.