

Pretend you are Martha Stewart – may not so much the Martha that went to prison – but the one who really knows how to throw a party, the one whose table always looked too perfect to actually eat at it. Now imagine her whisked back in time to set up the dinner party described by Saint Luke in our Gospel reading for today. The host was an influential Pharisee named Simon, one of the most respected men in the community, a man who zealously followed the Laws of Judaism. So when this prominent Pharisee invited Jesus of Nazareth, the popular itinerant preacher and miracle-worker whose words and works were the buzz of the entire country, this dinner suddenly became the hottest ticket in town.

You can imagine Martha supervising the scene, as servants scurried around making sure the tables were set flawlessly, the house decorated beautifully, and the food cooked perfectly. Talk about pressure; what do you serve Jesus Christ for dinner? Heavenly Hash, Angel hair pasta? Divinity candy? Just imagine what it must have been like to throw a dinner party for Jesus! It must have been a circus just watching the entire anxious scene unfold!

And then it happened. Just as everything seemed to be going so well, an uninvited guest suddenly crashed the party. And what is worse, the party crasher was a woman known around town to have loose morals, the town sinner. She was certainly the last person in town who would have been on any guest list at this Pharisee's house, much less when he was hosting Jesus,

a man already famous in that part of the country for his prophetic voice and closeness to God.

And then, just when the hosts and guests thought it could not get worse, this woman approached Jesus himself, bent at his feet and began to weep on his feet, drying her tears from his feet with her hair, and then anointing his feet with perfume. It was bad enough that she even showed her face at this private affair in a respected religious home, but to take down her hair in public, weep all over the guest of honor's feet, and then pour out all that perfume that made the entire house smell like a brothel. In one fell swoop she had violated every imaginable rule of good etiquette, good manners, and good taste. Picture poor Martha Stewart fainting at the sight of her perfect party in ruins.

But before security could rush to escort the woman back to her place across town, Jesus took the initiative with a story. And clever story it was, for it sneaks up on the hearer rather innocently, but then unloads its message like a Trojan Horse. Before Simon knew what hit him, he had implicated himself, and anyone else who judged this woman with self-righteous indignation.

Jesus told a story about debts forgiven, but he was hinting that the same grace is at work when sins are forgiven. Either way, someone is released from a burden he or she cannot repay by the incredible generosity of someone willing to absorb the debt himself. Isn't this what Jesus would do for that woman, and every last one of us, on the cross?

That is why forgiven people cannot, and must not, withhold forgiveness or resent God's forgiveness for anyone else. Still, forgiveness can be a tricky thing.

Once upon a time I worked with a woman who had the most annoying habit: she was always forgiving people. Now you might think that forgiving people sounds like a wonderful Christian thing to do, but with this woman it made you want to strangle her.

If you would have a legitimate disagreement with her over some procedure, she would return a bit later, smile sweetly and say, "I forgive you for disagreeing with me." The clear implication being that anyone who might disagree with her had to have done something terribly wrong. That is one of those times when you don't want to be forgiven. I hadn't done anything wrong. If I allowed her to forgive me then I was acknowledging that I had somehow acted improperly. So I told I felt no guilt for disagreeing with her and didn't need her forgiveness.

A bit later she wandered back and wanted to forgive me for being cross with her. I wouldn't accept that either – it was the same trap. When anyone accepted her forgiveness, she considered herself vindicated and superior. And though she used this trick day after day to prop up her own righteousness, no one could ever remember her asking to be forgiven.

Being forgiven is a difficult thing. King David is recognized as one of the great figures of the old testament – not because he lead armies into battle, not because he killed a lot of people,

not because he found a clever way to steal another man's wife – he is considered a great man because he was able to recognize that in some things he had done wrong. He admitted his sin. He accepted the forgiveness of his god. For that he is a model for us all.

During our lives maybe you will run into one of those people who use forgiveness like a club to humble or get the best of other people and we will usually find that unacceptable. But I am sure there will be times when all of us find it hard to accept forgiveness even when it is something we genuinely need. The woman in the gospel was a great sinner to her people; she is a great saint to us. She was willing to acknowledge herself to be a sinner and she appreciated the gift of forgiveness that was given to her.

Most people don't stay away from the sacrament of reconciliation because they doubt God's forgiveness – I think the church is pretty clear that god is more than anxious to forgive whatever separates us from him. But people do stay away because they doubt that they are sinners. They don't think they need forgiveness. People have always tried to avoid being named a sinner but today the excuses are a lot easier to come by. The basic excuse is usually the same - Its not a sin; its not my fault because:

- I come from a bad environment
- I'm under a lot of stress
- I'm just asserting myself
- I am liberating myself

- I am just being myself
- Or that classic favorite -Someone else made me do it

But behind all of that questionable pop psychology, there is still hurt and loneliness, selfishness and pain. That means there is still evil and sin. But until we are willing to call it sin, we can't accept the forgiveness that will bring peace and wholeness into our lives.

Until the "life of the party," the "social drinker," the person "just relaxing a little," can call himself or herself an alcoholic they will remain trapped in their problem. Only when David names himself a sinner could the prophet Nathan also name him "forgiven."

On this Sunday in June we want to think about vacations or relaxing or maybe about plans for celebrating Father's Day next week. It is probably too much to expect you to search your souls today and find there the need to repent. It would be enough for today to remember the promise of forgiveness and wonder at the incredible generosity of God. If the adultery of David, or the murderous persecution of Paul, the unnamed sin of the woman in the gospel, could be so lovingly forgiven then so can we.