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“By the grace of God I am what I am” (1 Cor 15:10).

1 Cor 15:1-11; Luke 7:36-50

Both readings today emphasize the power of God’s forgiveness to invoke love. St. Paul summarizes the faith handed on to him, that Christ died for our sins and was raised from the dead. This gift of mercy visible in his death on cross and his resurrections was witnessed by Cephas and the Twelve, then a series of others, including Paul, who calls himself “abnormally born” because of his unworthiness as a persecutor of the church. He then adds that because of this grace he has worked harder than any of the others. Great forgiveness produced great love.

This is the theme of today’s Gospel story of the sinful woman who lavished love on Jesus in the house of the Pharisee. Jesus links her great love to the fact that she had experienced God’s forgiveness and had come to the house to express her gratitude. We note that the forgiveness came first and not as the result of her repentance. God initiated her encounter with unconditional and unearned mercy, for which the woman was responding,

This reverses the order of many religious ideas of forgiveness -- that if we do penance, offer sacrifice, commit to a difficult program of discipline, then God might forgive us. The heart of the Gospel is that God never stops loving us, no matter what. St. Paul clearly understood this, and St. Peter was likewise the greatest example of mercy. Both Apostles, considered to be the foundation of the early church, emptied themselves into their ministries out of love for God, who had saved

them through Jesus Christ.

This is why faith in God's love is so important. As soon as we begin to doubt this, we slip back into fear and guilt, or we adopt the pride of the Pharisee in the story who assumed that he was superior to the woman and had no need of mercy. His lack of love was evident in the way he had denied Jesus the basic protocols of respect and courtesy as his guest. The woman knew her faults and seized the freedom lavished on her by mercy, which in turn enabled her to lavish love on Jesus. She fulfilled Isaiah 52: 7 by her outpouring of gratitude: "How beautiful are the feet of the one who brings good news."

The Gospel of love is expressed in 1 John 4:18: "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love." Only God can initiate this perfect love. Our very existence depends on it, and it sustains us and calls us to respond to God at every step in our lives, even during times of estrangement and resistance. We need only to turn and accept it, trust it, free ourselves from anything that limits our ability live out its freedom and bounty.

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