

CHAIN OF FOOLS
Sermon for Pentecost 4C- Lk 7:36-8:3
LPC, 6/16/13

It's June, so naturally I'm talking about Christmas.

Do you remember that part of Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* where Ebenezer Scrooge, that bitter old skinflint, encounters the ghost of his long-dead partner Jacob Marley?

Marley is attached to many heavy ledgers and strongboxes by yards and yards of ponderous chains, which he drags around and shakes for dramatic effect. When Scrooge asks him about them, Marley says, "I wear the chains I forged in life. I made it link by link, and yard by yard; I girded it on of my own free will, and of my own free will I wore it."

Marley then says that Scrooge's own chains are much more fearsome, because Scrooge's were as long when Marley died, and Scrooge has been adding to them ever since.

Interesting concept, isn't it? That our own meanness forges chains that bind us cumulatively. We may be unconscious of our chains while we live, but after we are dead they weigh us down and deny us rest.

Dickens was a good Anglican churchman, and although *A Christmas Carol* is a fable rather than a tract, it contains some passable theology. It's mind-stretching, if nothing else, to think of sin as that which binds us, and that the bonds of sin are to a large extent voluntary, cumulative (unless repented), and, while we live, largely invisible.

What chains might we be dragging around?

Simon the Pharisee in today's Gospel reading from Luke makes me think of invisible chains. Simon invites Jesus to dinner, but not only is he ungenerous in his hospitality; he is particularly ungenerous in his attitude toward the woman who washes Jesus' feet. Simon's ungenerosity binds him. This is apparent in the assumptions he makes.

Simon assumes that the woman's notoriety makes her unclean. He further assumes that her uncleanness is contagious: that his own home is polluted by her presence, and that Jesus is polluted by contact with her. Finally, Simon assumes that if Jesus were truly a prophet, a holy man, he would realize the woman is unclean and have nothing to do with her.

Simon bases these assumptions on his religious code. That would seem to be a firm basis for making assumptions. But Simon's lack of generosity leads him to assume that God too is ungenerous. Jesus, who is not only truly a prophet and a holy man, but also the Son of God himself, *is* generous. Jesus knows an act of pure love and gratitude,

The Very Rev. Cynthia Byers Walter

like the woman's, is never wrong. Despite Simon's assumptions, Jesus does know the woman's heart, but more importantly, he knows Simon's. Simon's heart is just as encumbered by sin as the woman's.

In fact, just as Scrooge's chains are worse than Marley's because Scrooge has added to them unawares, Simon's chains are worse than the woman's because he too has added to them unawares, while the woman has acknowledged hers and been freed from them.

What are the chains that we drag around unawares?

How can we drag chains around without being aware of them? Easy. We too assume. Like Simon, we assume our religiosity vindicates us from our sins. Or, like Simon, we compare our minor sins to the egregious wrongdoing of notorious sinners and figure that by comparison our sins don't matter. I mean in the hierarchy of sin, ungenerosity can't compare to sexual wantonness, right?

In a court of law, a hierarchy of offense is appropriate. The punishment should fit the crime. Jaywalking should not be a capital offense. Murder deserves more than a slap on the wrist. But to consider sin as a hierarchy in a theological sense puts human beings on very thin ice.

For one thing, people's lives are closely linked. There is no telling what effect one person's minor sin will have upon another person. I can think of a credible scenario where one person's ungenerosity could contribute to another's sexual wantonness.

For another thing, even if sin is "victimless," all sin contributes to the evil in the world. In Kingdom of Heaven theology, what one person does matters to the world. You either participate in the Kingdom of Heaven on earth, or you stand in the way. We humans have a genius for standing in the way, often just by doing nothing.

Plus, the cycle of sin, unless interrupted by forgiveness, is cumulative, like Scrooge's chains. The more one sins, the heavier the chains get. You can see this in the development of bad habits and addictions.

What is the evidence of invisible chains? Here are a few: Guilt. A heavy sense of obligation. Meanness. Chronic discontent. Pervasive complaining or criticism of others. Ungenerosity. I ask again, what are the chains we are dragging around unawares? I'll tell you honestly, I've been hearing some clanging when I've moved around lately.

How do we get rid of invisible chains? We give them up to God. Then we don't grab them back again. Human beings have a genius for that too.

On the other hand, getting rid of the chains feels so good. So good that we may be moved to acts of senseless beauty or extraordinary kindness. Like singing out loud, or smiling at everyone at the grocery store, or putting an extra bill in the collection plate ...or even washing someone's feet.