

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

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Luke 7:36-50

"She Loved Much"

Jesus has become "the friend of sinners" and has welcomed many of "the poor" into his new kingdom of God. For this he has earned the affection of the marginalized, but growing criticism from the establishment of 1st century Judaism. That he would enter the homes of and share the table with "tax collectors and sinners" earns him disrepute among "the righteous." But here Luke shows us, by way of illustration, a mealtime full of irony. Jesus accepts the dinner invitation of Simon, a Pharisee, who is at least curious about Jesus if clearly not yet a disciple. And into their banquet comes all uninvited a woman of the town who is "a notorious sinner" - a euphemism for a prostitute. The question that lurks at the dinner is "who is the real sinner here?"

Now you are probably aware that there are several accounts in the Gospels of women who make extravagant gestures to Jesus that involve perfume, tears, and "letting down their hair." Thanks to an unfortunate but famous sermon by Pope Gregory in the 6th century, the stories of three women were conflated - the prostitute of Luke 7, Mary of Bethany in Matthew, Mark and John, and Mary Magdalene. Gregory made these into stories of one woman, and so arose the story that Mary Magdalene was a forgiven prostitute. No scholar believes this today - although it still turns up in popular culture. But it's clear that the anointing in Bethany was considered by Jesus an anointing for his

burial, and was criticized for its monetary extravagance; whereas the story in Luke 7 is about the relationship between love and forgiveness.

1) *Simon, his Friends, and That Woman*

Simon the Pharisee is critical of Jesus for not recognizing the woman as a prostitute - "if he was a prophet he would know who she is" - but ironically Jesus is a prophet, who can read Simon's thoughts! Simon has shown Jesus only modest hospitality - no foot-washing, no oil for an honored guest - and his other guests are critical of Jesus' claims about forgiveness. So "the righteous" at this dinner are "self-righteous," whereas the "sinful woman" is now scandalous for her demonstration of love for Jesus, rather than for her past activities in the town! The scene is loaded with irony!

The woman approaches Jesus "from behind... as he reclines at table." To grasp the action, you have to picture a formal 1st C. banquet, copied from Greco-Roman practice, of a U-shaped low table surrounded by cushions, where the guests stretch out, leaning on their left elbows, their feet draped away from the table. So Jesus' feet are the nearest part of him as the woman approaches. She stands at his feet and weeps. Why, we are not told - but the context makes clear that it must be a mixture of joy at seeing Jesus and sadness over her now forgiven past. It is pointed out

by commentators that her actions are inexplicable unless she already knows Jesus from a previous encounter, and has already shown her penitence and received forgiveness. Indeed Jesus' words of explanation for her actions are that *"her sins have been forgiven"* – past tense.

Her actions are clearly not now, nor presumably ever have been, held back by other people's accusations of scandalous behavior! As her tears fall on Jesus' feet, she does something unthinkable for a respectable woman in public, and unwinds her hair – literally "lets her hair down," as only a prostitute would! Then she wipes Jesus' wet feet with her hair! To round it off, she pours perfume on his feet – not on his head, but on one of the most "unclean" parts of his body. Some scholars say the whole scene has an erotic aura – not least because she is "fondling Jesus feet," in itself apparently a common sexual move. What is this woman doing? Why is she here? And why in the world would Jesus allow such a display? He's a prophet??

Jesus of course sees something in her actions much more significant, and quite different, than Simon and his other guests do – Jesus sees devotion and gratitude and extravagant love flowing out of this woman along with her tears. And he knows that this sort of devotion springs from a deep experience of grace, of acceptance, of forgiveness – which this woman alone, of all the people in the room, has received!

And to make this clear to everyone else, Jesus tells the disarming little parable about two debtors, one who owed little and one who owed much, and whose gratitude when their debts were cancelled was in proportion to their debt. So, says Jesus to Simon and friends: this woman sinned much, was forgiven much, and so loves much. Which part of that do you not understand? There

has always been debate over and difficulty translating that little conjunction in vs. 47: *"her many sins have been forgiven – for she loved much."* Does that "for" mean "because"? – that her love has earned her forgiveness? Doesn't sound much like Jesus' teaching! Or does "for" mean "as shown by"? – that her love is evidence of her forgiveness? Surely the second – (cf. the NIV's hyphen), if only through the parallel with the next sentence: *"he who has been forgiven little loves little."* Or in the other words from Jesus, *"her faith has saved her,"* not her great love for him.

2) Love and Forgiveness

So what is the point of all this? It's about an implicit question, raised by the parable and the woman's actions, which Jesus leaves with Simon and friends: *"Do you, who love me so very little, not understand how great your debt is to God, and how much you need forgiveness?"*

It's a compelling question, and one that of course challenges people in all ages, and not just at Simon's banquet: people who are oblivious to their debts to God, people who deny vigorously that they have any debts, people who deny that God has any right to collect anyway, people who are curious about Jesus and his teachings but dislike the idea of grace, people who think Jesus should be pleased with any attention they give him, people who despise enthusiasm and extravagant expression, people who could not themselves ever behave extravagantly, people who think the kingdom of God is for "good people" and not for "sinners." I suppose we are all represented at Simon's banquet.

To deny that we owe God anything is blindness, and simply in what other contexts we readily call "living in denial" – because there is strong reason to think that nobody is entirely ignorant of the existence and character of God; that at some deep level we

all know we have failed to live up the moral standards of the Creator, and that one of the things that makes this world a mess is that we deny and repress what we know to be true. So there is no doubt that the first step towards a joyful redemption is to admit that we have been deceiving ourselves.

But at the other end of the spectrum, among people – perhaps most of us here - who have at some level faced who we are before God; who know something of repentance and forgiveness; people who have tasted the grace and mercy of God; there remains this awkward issue of how to respond appropriately. Extravagant expressions of love and devotion would be very hard for most of us. We are just not “wired that way,” either by our genes, or by the environment in which we were raised and are comfortable.

I am not prone to lavish expressions of emotion – born and raised in England, I have inherited and learned layers of “British reserve.” Add to that 20 years in New England, and a decade on the East End of Long Island, and it’s a wonder I can even smile – one of the “frozen chosen!” I’m pretty reserved about expressing how I feel – about faith or about anything else. That doesn’t mean I have no emotions, but it does mean that I express them in my own culturally-conditioned ways. I am, after all, not Italian, or Latino..! And I was not raised Pentecostal, or even Baptist, but Episcopalian, and now I’m a Congregational Pastor!

So I - and many of you - would find it very hard (and perhaps seriously inappropriate) to express our devotion to Jesus Christ through tears, “letting our hair down,” pouring out perfume, or kissing Jesus’ feet – whether we were men or women! So let us stipulate that whatever Jesus is commending in the actions of the woman at Simon the Pharisee’s house, it is *not* all about visible and audible expressions of *emotion*. It is

about finding our own deep and personal ways of showing our devotion to our Lord.

Whatever they may be, I think we have to learn from this passage that we cannot allow propriety and cultural pressure to dictate our way of Christian discipleship. There are times when we ought to “rock the boat” among the people we mix with, as a natural expression of our Christianity. That might be done in a very quiet voice in a meeting, and be just as explosive a testimony to our faith as a prostitute wiping Jesus’ feet with her hair.

And perhaps a clue to what we may need to express is found in the very discomfort we feel at reading this passage in Luke 7. Certainly Simon the Pharisee and his guests were uncomfortable at the woman’s behavior, and found it disturbing and shocking. And we are more than a little alarmed by the emotional and extravagant gestures, and the suggestion that they are erotic elements in this woman’s actions.

Maybe what we need to do, in our expressions of faith, is to be bold enough at times to step beyond our cultural comfort zones and “stand up,” “speak up,” for Christian faith. Feeling alarmed or awkward about it may just be the sign to us that we are willing to risk a little for God – to risk our reputations to stand with Jesus Christ on issues that matter.

Be all this as it may – we shall never have to worry about how to express our deep devotion to Christ if we don’t have it in the first place! That devotion comes only to those who appreciate at a deep level just how much they owe God, just how high a price Jesus paid for our redemption; how his grace reaches us in forgiveness and mercy and cancellation of debt. “*My chains fell off, my heart was free; I rose, went forth, and followed thee*” wrote Charles Wesley. You never know

how people who have experienced that freedom may then behave!

Grace received brings out love. That's fundamental to Christianity: *"We love because he first loved us"* (1 Jn 4). Thanks be to Jesus for being "a friend of sinners;" may we sinners learn to respond to him in love, and then be sent out whole and in peace to serve him boldly.

Let us pray...