

Luke 7:36 One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and took his place at the table. 37 And a woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. 38 She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment. 39 Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him—that she is a sinner." 40 Jesus spoke up and said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." "Teacher," he replied, "Speak." 41 "A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. 42 When they could not pay, he canceled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?" 43 Simon answered, "I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt." And Jesus said to him, "You have judged rightly." 44 Then turning toward the woman, he said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. 45 You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. 46 You did not anoint my

head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. 47 Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.” 48 Then he said to her, “Your sins are forgiven.” 49 But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, “Who is this who even forgives sins?” 50 And he said to the woman, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.”

### A KEY VERSE

The key to understanding this passage is found toward the end of our passage in verse 47. In that verse Jesus says, “... her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love.”

The tense of the verb indicates a past action that continues to have a present effect. Sometime prior to the dinner party this woman had met Jesus and had been transformed by the power of his forgiveness.

Maybe she is part of a large band of women who have been touched by the ministry of Jesus and now follow him as disciples. (Luke 8:1-3)

So, Jesus knows something about this woman that no one else at the dinner party knows. Her actions are not bizarre or suggestive, as many believe.

They are the result of deep gratitude. This woman, whose sins were many, has been forgiven and she has been given a new lease on life. She has been changed by the power of the gospel.

## SETTING THE SCENE

Let me set the scene for you.

A prominent Pharisee named Simon invited Jesus to have dinner with him.

It's important to note that the Pharisees were very devout people. They devoted their entire lives to studying the scriptures and attempting to live by them. If this story were being told today the Pharisees would be what we might call "good church folk."

So, Jesus is invited to the home of this very devout and religious man for dinner.

The homes of the wealthy in that day were built around an open courtyard in the form of a hollow square. Often there was a fountain or a garden. And

in good weather most of the meals were taken outside in this lovely setting.

When a famous rabbi ate at such as house, all sorts of people came to hear him. Everyone was welcome to come and listen ... even a woman with a bad reputation.

In those days they didn't sit at a table, they reclined at table, laying on low couches and resting on their left elbow so that the right arm would be free for eating. Their feet would be stretched out behind them during the meal with their sandals removed.

So this dinner is not a private affair. It is a public event in which some people are eating and discussing theology while others listen.

And that's how this woman happens to be standing at Jesus' feet.

## TOUCHED BY A SINNER

Everyone at the dinner party knew this woman ... or at least they thought they knew her. The NIV translates that she was a "woman who had lived a sinful life in that town." She had a reputation. She was an untouchable.

But, she reaches out and touches Jesus in the most dramatic way.

First she wets his feet with her tears, and then, in an attempt to wipe off the tears she lets down her hair and wipes his feet with her hair. And while she is wiping his feet with her hair she starts kissing his feet and anointing his feet with a jar of ointment.

The murmurings at the dinner table are audible. And Simon thinks,

“I have wasted my money inviting this guy to dinner. If he were really a prophet he would know that this woman is a sinner.”

Simon assumed that if Jesus only knew what he knew about this woman he would behave quite differently. Simon assumed that he knew the woman, and he assumed that he knew Jesus.

Both assumptions were wrong.

Earlier in this same chapter we learn that Jesus' reputation had already taken a hit because of the company he was keeping. Jesus not only ate with

religious Pharisees. Jesus also ate with tax collectors and sinners.

The “good” people couldn’t understand why a kosher rabbi would do such a thing. Some were saying that this Jesus must actually be a glutton and drunkard!

Simon thought, “Well, this proves it. This man is a sham. Jesus is not a prophet.”

## WE OWE MORE THAN WE CAN PAY

But, then Jesus shows that he is a prophet by reading Simon’s mind! Jesus knows Simon better than Simon knows himself.

And Jesus also knows us better than we know ourselves. We think that we know what it means to be righteous. We think that we have it all together when it comes to faith. Jesus tells us that when it comes to sin we don’t have a clue.

Sin in this passage is likened to a debt. (We do the same thing in our translation of the Lord’s Prayer. Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.)

Many of us have a false sense of security when it comes to our finances. We think that we are doing

okay but one day the bill comes due and we realize that we have been kidding ourselves. We owe more than we can pay.

Jesus says that the same thing is true with our lives. We can ignore our brokenness and sin, but there will come a day when we have to see ourselves for who we really are.

Jesus told Simon a story about two people who owed a debt, both to the same person. Both were not able to pay, but one debt was much larger than the other. Both debts were forgiven. Jesus said, “Who do you think is going to appreciate this gift more?”

And Simon replied, I suppose the one who was forgiven more.”

Let me ask you a question this morning. Are you a big sinner or a small sinner? Has God forgiven a lot in your life or just a little? If the truth is told, many of us, especially those of us who are religious are a lot like Simon. We think that we’re in pretty good shape. We think that we’re in a position to judge others.

But notice what the parable teaches. We all owe more than we can pay. We all fall short. We are all

in foreclosure when it comes to sin. The sign is in the yard and the padlock is on the door. Our house is not in order. Our house is about to be auctioned at a bargain basement price!

In this example salvation would be symbolized by receiving an unexpected windfall that allows us to keep our home just before we are kicked out on the street. It would be like winning the lottery and being able to have our life back. How would we feel in such a situation?

Jesus tells us that this is what it's like to be forgiven.

## OVERWHELMED BY FORGIVENESS

In order to appreciate salvation we have to first appreciate the depth of our own sin. The woman at Jesus' feet appreciated the depth of her sin and that explained the depth of her gratitude. She was overwhelmed by forgiveness.

And yet, many of us in the church seem underwhelmed by forgiveness. Each week I say the most incredible thing, "In Jesus Christ, we are forgiven." And sometimes that statement is met with a chorus of yawns!

I know the words are always the same, and sometimes a liturgical worship service can seem a bit repetitive. But, the message is important and personal. God in Christ has forgiven what we cannot pay. God in Christ has given us mercy that we do not deserve.

In that regard the woman in this story is an example of faith. Faith in this passage is expressed an overwhelming sense of gratitude that leads to humble service.

Jesus asks Simon, “Do you see this woman?” Simon sees her, but he doesn’t really see her. Simon thinks that she is a symbol of all that is wrong with the world. But, in her humble service she is actually a symbol of what it means to be saved.

It is an extravagant, emotional outpouring of love. It is a love that does not count the cost. It is a joy that understands not only the depth of sin but also the depth of God’s forgiveness.

These are two parts of the same movement. The hymn, Amazing Grace puts it well, it was “ ... grace that taught my heart to fear and grace those fears relieved.”

## DO YOU SEE?

When Simon and his friends look at the woman bathing Jesus' feet with her tears and drying them with her hair, they see a "woman of the city."

But, Jesus sees something else. Jesus sees a "daughter of Abraham," a member of the family who understands the depths of sin and grace.

Throughout the gospels we encounter this theme. Those who think that they can see are really spiritually blind. And those who are blind and know it are actually closer to true sight.

Often when Jesus heals the blind it is not only a miracle for those who are disabled. It is also a statement of judgment toward those who think that they can see. (See John 9:39-41)

Do you remember when Jesus and his disciples were watching people enter the temple?

Rich people brought in huge bags and money and dropped them in the temple offering. But, there was one poor widow who put only one penny in the offering.

Now the disciples thought that her offering was insignificant. For the disciples she was not important. She may as well have been invisible. They did not see her.

But, Jesus saw her. And he said,

“This poor widow has given more than everybody else combined, because she has given all that she had.”

Jesus didn't ask the question but he could have. Do you see this woman? And the disciples would have replied, “Well, now that you mention it Jesus we didn't see her.”

There are many people that we don't see either. All of us are blind in many ways.

## SELECTIVE VISION

Have you ever noticed how news coverage is only about one thing? It's like we can't focus on anything but the one big story at a time.

But, I wonder if there are other stories that we are missing. I wonder if our selective focus blinds us to things that are potentially even more important?

History gives us a very painful example of how this happens.

When allied troops entered the south German town of Dachau toward the end of World War II, they could smell the stench of decaying human flesh and burning flesh miles before they arrived in town.

What they found in the camp on the edge of town was horrifying. Thousands of people had been put to death in a horrible slaughter chamber.

And yet when many of the citizens of the town were asked about the camp they professed ignorance. “We didn’t know those things were going on out there.”

They said this despite the fact that many of them actually worked at the camp. They all professed ignorance.

They didn’t see. Instead that focused on other things. They saw what they wanted to see.

It is only natural for us human beings to see what we want to see. It is only natural that we blind ourselves to what is too frightening or too painful to see.

## SPIRITUAL VISION

The same is true in our spiritual life. Sometimes we become so focused on one thing that we miss what is really important.

Religion itself becomes a hindrance instead of help. In our pride we become blinded to the reality of our own sin and thus we eliminate the potential of joyful forgiveness.

Among all the other gifts that Jesus gives us is the gift of sight. Jesus helps us look at the world in a different way. Jesus becomes the lens through which we can see the world more clearly.

In the church where Martin Luther preached in Germany there is a painting of Martin Luther preaching near the altar. Luther is in his pulpit on the right hand side of the painting pointing toward the crucified Christ who hangs on the cross.

And on the other side, of the painting on the left, just beyond the cross is the congregation. In other words, the crucified Christ is the lens through which the preacher sees the congregation.

The preacher looks to the congregation through the crucified Christ. The preacher is enabled to see the congregation differently because the preacher looks at people to some degree as Jesus looks on people.

Viewing others through the cross of Christ enables us to see the possibility of forgiveness. And viewing others through the cross of Christ reminds us that we too are sinners without hope save for the grace of God as revealed in Jesus Christ.

## NOW I SEE

The other great figure of the Reformation, John Calvin called scripture the “lens” through which Christians view the world.

It’s been several years now since I first got my first pair of glasses after many years of squinting. But, finally I concluded that my arms would never stretch far enough to find a good reading distance, and I had to give in and get some glasses.

I still remember how different the world looked! The world came into focus in a new way.

In the same way scripture brings the world into focus. We see things and people that we had not noticed

before. And other things that were once special to us fade out of focus.

Once again in the words of Amazing Grace, grace teaches our heart to fear and grace those fears relieve. I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see.

God help us see the depth of our sin and the depth of his mercy. Amen.