

Luke 7:36-50

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 PARTY INTERRUPTED

A Pharisee named Simon is throwing a dinner party. And everyone who is someone has come to the party.

At the center of the meal is the Jesus. He's the young prophet that everyone is talking about. He's like the prophets of old. He speaks a word and people are healed. He speaks a word and even the dead are raised.

Expectations for the evening are very high.  
But, there is also a sense of uneasiness about Jesus.

He eats with sinners. He disobeys the Sabbath laws. Jesus is not one of the religious elite. The movers and shakers of the world wonder if this Jesus might be a charlatan, a troublemaker.

We learn later that though Jesus was invited to the party, he wasn't treated with the hospitality due an honored guest: no oil for his hair, no cool water to wash his dusty feet, and no kiss of greeting.

I wonder if Simon's oversight was a reflection of his ambivalence about Jesus. Simon might have thought, "They say he's a prophet, but I'm not so sure."

Before they can even serve the appetizers this elite gathering of men is interrupted by a woman.

She is described by the text as a woman from the city who is a sinner. We don't really know why she is considered to be a sinner. But, suffice it to say that whatever she has done others know about it, including those who had been invited to this dinner party.

Her mere presence at the party caused a stir. But, what she does next causes even more trouble. She makes a beeline for Jesus, the guest of honor.

And she stands behind him weeping profusely. In those days they reclined for the meal, and as the woman stands at the feet of Jesus, she cries so much that she moistens his feet.

And she kneels down and dries those moistened feet with her hair. Finally she anoints his feet with an alabaster jar of ointment.

If Simon and his guests thought that they were going to enjoy a quiet evening discussing theology over dinner, this party crasher dashed those hopes. Can't you just hear their disgruntled comments?

"Why is she doing this? This public display of devotion is quite unappetizing."

And Simon thinks,

"If this guy were really a prophet he would know that this woman is a sinner. We made a big mistake when we invited him to dinner."

## THE PRICE OF FORGIVENESS

But, Jesus is a prophet. In fact Jesus knows what Simon is thinking.

And Jesus knows why the woman is making such a public display of her affection. So, to share this knowledge with the others, Jesus asks Simon a question that is almost like a little parable.

Jesus asks,

“Who do you think will be the most grateful: a man who was forgiven a debt of 500 denarii or a man who is forgiven a debt of 50 denarii?”

(For those of you who are wondering, a denarius was a day’s wage for a workingman. So both debts were considerable.)

But, that’s almost beside the point of the parable. The important thing to note is the math. The first man is forgiven ten times more than the second man.

“So, Simon, tell me. Who would be more grateful?”

Simon does the math.

“I suppose the man for whom the greater debt was cancelled.”

(Simon has heard about Jesus. Sometimes he asks trick questions. He tries to hedge his bets by saying I “suppose” the one for whom the greater debt was cancelled. But, as we will soon learn, it is hard to play it safe when you’re talking to a prophet.)

Jesus asks another question,

“Simon, do you see this woman?”

She’s like the man who was forgiven the larger debt. She’s been forgiven much; maybe ten times more than what others have been forgiven.

And that’s why she is acting the way she is acting. It’s gratitude, extreme gratitude.

That’s why she is weeping. That’s why she is bathing my feet with her tears. That’s why she’s wiping my feet with her hair. That’s why she is anointing my feet.

She has been forgiven a large debt. And that has changed her life.”

## THE FORGIVENESS LOTTERY

I like the financial image when it comes to forgiveness.  
We owe more than we can pay, and God in Christ forgives the debt.

Sometimes I think,

“Wouldn’t it be wonderful to win the lottery? I could be debt free. I could live in a different way.”

Well salvation is like the forgiveness lottery. God in Christ gives us what we cannot purchase on our own.

And like winning the lottery this gives us the freedom to live in a different manner. We are no longer captives to our guilt and sin.

This not only restores our relationship with God it also restores and renews our relationship with others. We no longer have anything to prove to others. Our debts have been cancelled.

We are freed to live a new way by the power of God’s grace.

That old gospel hymn still says it best, “Jesus paid it all.” The woman knew this, and that made her extremely grateful.

## YOUR SINS ARE FORGIVEN

After his exchange with Simon Jesus turns to the woman and speaks to her directly. He says, “Your sins are forgiven.”

I think that pronouncement of forgiveness was more for the benefit of Simon and the other shocked dinner guests than for the woman because her behavior suggests that she had already met Jesus. Jesus had touched her life in some way and had forgiven her sins.

And that’s why her expression of forgiveness was so extreme, so emotional and total. She was so grateful to Jesus that she really didn’t care what the others thought. Her sins were forgiven, and that changed everything.

Jesus wants Simon and his guests to know that her sins are forgiven. But, Jesus also wants the woman to be reassured of her forgiveness.

Some things, like total forgiveness seem too good to be true. And so Jesus repeats these words for her so that they might sink deep into her broken and reborn heart.

I've said it before, but it bears repeating. The reason we have a confession of sin and a declaration of pardon at each service is this: we need to hear the message again and again.

In Jesus Christ we are forgiven. It is this message more than anything else that enables us to live in a new way.

No matter what anyone else says or thinks, by the power of God's grace you have been given a new life free from the judgments and expectations of others. We say it each week so that the message might sink deep into our hearts and give us hope.

Forgiveness changes everything. And we need to be reminded of that ... often.

But, this story has another message. In order to be forgiven, we need to know that we are sinners. In order to be forgiven and experience extreme gratitude, we need to understand the depth of our need.

## TEARS OF JOY AND SADNESS

Sometimes people say the message of grace is too gracious.

We don't want those whom everybody in town can identify as a sinner to get off Scott free. We somehow think that there has to be higher price to be paid by those who owe more than we owe.

I understand. Sometimes we turn the message of God's costly grace into the parody of a get of jail free card, cheap grace as Bonhoeffer called it.

That's not the message.

The woman's tears were tears of joy and gratitude. But, I wonder if her tears were not also tears of confession. True grace always has a bittersweet taste.

This woman really was a sinner. Everyone knew it was true. She had not been the person that she should have been. Her life in many ways had been wasted. Maybe she didn't totally realize that until she met Jesus.

And yet now she understands the depth of her sin and so she cries. She cries tears of joy, and she cries tears of sadness. She loves much because she has been forgiven much.

## EXTREME JUDGMENT

But, suppose we don't understand that. Suppose we think that we are "pretty good."

We think,

"If God grades on a curve, we'll be in the top ten percent. Maybe that's good enough. Maybe I'm good enough."

That was Simon. And unfortunately, at least some of the time, that's us.

Knowledge of our sin and the reality of God's forgiveness will prompt extreme gratitude and love. In contrast self-righteousness will prompt a sense of entitlement and a judgmental spirit.

I don't know about you, but I feel a bit uneasy when Jesus starts to criticize his host. Can you imagine how uneasy everyone at the table felt that evening? The extreme gratitude of the woman is compared to Simon's neglect.

Remember, in that part of the world hospitality was (and still is) considered to be a sacred duty. Jesus is strongly criticizing the man who invited him to dinner. In the Middle East this is not just a social faux pas. This is extreme judgment.

Why does Jesus do this? I think that Jesus judges in order to save.

Jesus wants to shock his host into seeing things in a different way. Jesus wants Simon to understand that no matter how much we owe it is more than we can pay. Notice that both of the men in the parable owed more than they could pay. (See Luke 7:42)

But, sometimes those who owe less do not recognize their need. They love less. They are not grateful.

Jesus once said that in order to get well we must know that we are sick. Only then will we call in the physician (Luke 5:31).

Jesus is sounding the alarm.

Simon is sick. He is sin sick, and he needs God's forgiveness just as much as the woman who weeps at Jesus' feet.

### WHAT'S SO BAD ABOUT FORGIVENESS?

Unfortunately, Simon and his friends do not respond positively to Jesus' shocking judgment. Instead, they make a judgment of their own.

When Jesus tells the woman "you sins are forgiven," Simon and the dinner guest ask out loud, "Who is this, who even forgives sins?"

You see they believed that only God could forgive sins. And they did not perceive the presence of God in Jesus.

Did you ever wonder why they crucified Jesus?

Up to this point in Luke's gospel pretty much all Jesus does is preach and teach and heal.

What's wrong with that? Why would anyone want to get rid of a person like that?

But, then you read this story and you begin to understand why they killed Jesus. In this story, Jesus forgives sin and that gets him into trouble.

You might ask, "What's so bad about forgiveness?" Nothing as long as you think you need it. But, the promise of forgiveness is an insult, a heresy to those who think that they don't need it.

There are two main characters in our story. To one, forgiveness is sheer blessing. Forgiveness is so beautiful it breaks her heart. Her gratitude is extreme.

The other character, Simon, is pretty sure that he doesn't need forgiveness. He is a law-abiding citizen. He has never even had a speeding ticket. He is a pillar of his community.

He doesn't think that he needs forgiveness.

And so when Jesus talks about forgiveness to Simon, it's not good news. It's bad news. Simon feels threatened by talk of forgiveness. He takes offense at Jesus and his message.

Who does Jesus think that he is? God?

Well, Simon, that's right. Jesus is God in the flesh. He does indeed have the divine authority to free people who are captive to sin. Those who know that they are captives to sin will rejoice at this message.

In contrast, those who labor under the belief that they are already free will be offended. And over time that offense will turn into anger. And anger will turn into violence.

A word of forgiveness is a powerful word.

Last week Jesus raised the widow's son from the dead. That was powerful. But, this week he says, "Your sins are forgiven." That is even more powerful.

## JESUS INVITES US TO DINNER

This is a great story. But, the story continues.

Jesus comes to our house, and he tells us, "Your sins are forgiven." How we respond to that message will depend upon how we see ourselves.

Let's be honest.

There's a lot of Simon in all of us.

We all have a penchant to go searching for the splinters in our neighbor's eye rather than pulling out the plank in our own eye.

But, at the meal we are reminded that we saved by grace alone.

These days we don't invite Jesus to dinner. Jesus invites us to dinner.

We call it the Lord's Supper or Communion or the Eucharist. That last word for communion, Eucharist is helpful in this context.

It means "thanksgiving." The Eucharist, the Lord's Supper is about extreme thanksgiving. All that we have and all that we are we owe to the grace of God as revealed in Christ Jesus.

When we come to dinner with Jesus it is not a time to brag about who we are and what we know. It is a time to give thanks for what God has already done in Christ Jesus.

A minister told of celebrating the Lord's Supper with some Christians in Honduras, the second-poorest country in the Western hemisphere.

The onlookers from North America had trouble following the Spanish speaking service, but when they came to the Lord's Supper and the priest offered the bread and the wine it became more familiar.

At that point in the service there was a commotion.

The entire congregation rose as one, and pushing and shoving they threw themselves down at the altar. Their empty, hungry outstretched arms stretched toward the table.

The minister said that for the first time he really understood what the Lord's Supper was all about. He would never get out of his mind those hungry, outstretched arms, those open hands, clutching, even begging for a bit of the blessed bread.

Maybe that's why Jesus said that the hungry are blessed. The hungry know their need. Hunger puts things in focus. The hungry are willing to reach out.

Are you hungry for the grace of God? Do you believe that you are a sinner without hope except for the grace of God?

Then come to the banquet.

Jesus is the host. And people will come from East and West, North and South to eat at his table.

And the main course is forgiveness.  
Be grateful. Be extremely grateful.

Amen.