

Love and Forgiveness

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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."

THE PARTY CRASHER

Imagine this.

You're having a few friends over for a dinner party.
And you have also invited the new preacher in town.

But, before you can even serve the first course, a woman that you don't know (except by reputation) enters the home and kneels at the preacher's feet.

What would you do if that happened?

I would ask,
"Who gave her the right to crash my party?
You're not on my guest list.

Is there something wrong with you?
You have some nerve.
Who do you think you are?

And why are you kneeling at the preacher's feet?
Is there something that we don't know about this new preacher?
Who are you preacher, and what is your relationship with this woman?"

Well, basically this is what happens in our lesson for today.

WHO IS JESUS?

Throughout the gospel of Luke this question is asked again and again.
"Who is this new preacher in town?"

He doesn't act like any preacher we've seen before.
Who does he think he is?"

The actions of Jesus suggest an answer.

Wherever he goes, the sick are healed.
The lame walk. The blind see.
Even the dead are raised.

The crowds have been talking about Jesus.
They say that at the very least he's a great prophet and maybe ... maybe he's even the Messiah.

That's why Simon invited Jesus to the dinner party in the first place.
Word about Jesus had spread far and wide, and Simon wants to evaluate Jesus.

Simon wants to know.
"Who do you think you are Jesus?"

Simon is not willing to take the word of others on this.
After all, he's a Pharisee.
He's a religious expert.

He's seen Messiah wannabes come and go before.
He wants to judge for himself when it comes to Jesus.

So, he invites this new preacher to dinner.
But, it's not so much an invitation but an evaluation done over a meal.

Have you ever eaten a meal while you were being evaluated for a job?
I have. I must admit that it's hard to enjoy the meal when you know you're being evaluated.

NOT A PROPHET

And the tension of the moment is exacerbated by what happens next. A woman crashes the party, kneels at the feet of Jesus, cries to the point that his feet are wet, wipes his feet with her hair, kisses his feet, and then anoints his feet with oil.

Simon knows this woman ... at least by reputation.

And because Jesus allows her to continue this display, Simon thinks that he has his answer when it comes to Jesus. The people say that he's a prophet. But, it doesn't take much of a prophet to know what kind of woman is touching his feet.

A real prophet wouldn't let this happen.

Simon bases this evaluation on his theology, his understanding of the nature of God.

He believes that God would reject this woman because of her sinfulness. She has a bad reputation in that town.

And if Jesus allows her to touch him, then he's not a prophet. He can't speak for God.

DEBT AND LOVE

Jesus is not only a healer; he's also a mind reader. He knew from the look on Simon's face and from the silence at the table what they were thinking.

But, how could Jesus help these religious leaders understand the love and forgiveness of God? He uses a simple example.

He says,
"Simon, I have a question for you.
Two men owe money to a banker.

One owes 500 silver coins.
Another owes 50 silver coins.

Neither one of them can pay so the banker cancels both debts.
Which one of the two would be more grateful?"

Simon replies, "Well, I guess the one who was forgiven more."
Jesus said, "Right answer!"

AN EXAMPLE OF LOVE AND FORGIVENESS

Then Jesus turns to the woman who had anointed his feet with tears, kisses and oil.

And Jesus said, "Do you see this woman?"

What kind of question is that?

Of course they see that woman.
"That woman is the whole problem Jesus.

She's a sinner and she's touching you!"

But, Jesus sees her in a different light.

She's not just a sinner.

She's a forgiven sinner, and that makes all the difference in how she acts.

Simon has not been a very good host.

He has not provided water for Jesus' feet.

He has not given Jesus the customary greeting, a kiss.

He has not anointed his head with oil.

Perhaps, his lack of hospitality betrayed his suspicious attitude toward Jesus.

But, this woman's actions told a different story.

She bathed his feet with tears and dried them with her hair.

She fervently kissed his feet.

She anointed his feet with oil.

Why did she do that?

She was grateful.

Jesus had canceled her debt.

He had forgiven her sins.

Jesus said to everyone at the party,

"Her sins which were many are forgiven.

That's why she's so loving.

Of course, if you think that you're not that sinful, then you probably won't treasure forgiveness the way she does."

Then Jesus drives home the point by saying it again for all to hear.

He turns toward the woman and says,

"Your sins are forgiven.

You faith has saved you. Go in peace."

Now the dinner party is in an uproar.

And they ask the question that they have had from the very beginning,

“Who does this guy think he is that he can forgive sins? God?!”

THE GOD WE DIDN'T KNOW

Well ... guess that's the point.

This was more than they bargained for.

God was in Christ, and God was not anything like the God they had imagined.

That's still true you know.

God is in Christ, but quite often the God revealed in Jesus is not at all the God we imagined God to be.

We still tend to equate religion with righteousness.

We think that we can make it into heaven on our own merits.

The trouble is that we can never do enough.

We owe too much.

We will never pay off that credit card, even in a million years.

In fact sometimes the more we try to do the right thing the more we turn faith into something that is heartless and lifeless. We love little.

So what's a sinner to do?

When it comes to salvation the first step is to admit the truth.

Our life is out of control. We can't make it on our own.

We have messed up.

We have sinned.

We desperately need help.

Unfortunately it is human nature to deny our sin.

And if we are in our denial we will see no need for forgiveness.

Even when we are forced by circumstances to face the consequences of our sin, we try to minimize what we have done wrong. We say things like:

“There were extenuating circumstances.

Everyone else was doing it.

People misunderstood what I was saying.

I was just following procedures.”

In fact unless something happens to knock us off our high horse we just don't ask for forgiveness. Instead, we blame and judge those who fall short of our standards.

OUR NEED FOR FORGIVENESS

If that's the case, then we're the ones at the dinner party who want to put Jesus on trial. Instead, of embracing his offer of forgiveness and new life, we wonder why Jesus is so interested in forgiving those sinners and tax collectors.

Doesn't he know what they've done?
They don't deserve forgiveness.

Jesus knows what they've done.
And Jesus doesn't want these sinners to continue on the wrong path.
So, he forgives their sins and it is that forgiveness that enables them to find salvation.

Forgiveness allows the sinner to repent.
Forgiveness allows the sinner to go in a different direction.
Forgiveness allows the sinner to live in a new way.

Christians who have come to the faith from a very checkered background are often those who love the Lord the most. Why? Because they have been forgiven much.

They're like the slave runner who wrote our opening hymn, Amazing Grace,
“They once were lost but now are found.
They once were blind but now they see.”

We don't have to be the world's worst sinner in order to experience amazing grace.
We just have to acknowledge that we are sinners.
We have to get beyond our self-righteous facades in order to ask for forgiveness.

We need to admit that we are not the man or the woman that we need to be, the man or woman we are called to be.

And we need to pray,
 “Lord have mercy on me a sinner.”

That is the faith that saves us.
 That is the faith that gives us peace.
 How does the hymn put it?
 “How precious did that grace appear the hour I first believed.”

MESSY FORGIVENESS

Many people at the dinner party that day were embarrassed.
 They were embarrassed that the woman made such a “fool” of herself in public.
 And they were embarrassed that Jesus allowed it to happen.

Religious people who live in the rarified air of what is “proper” do not like public displays of affection like this.

It’s too emotional.
 It’s too human.
 We frozen chosen prefer the cool comfort of ritual and right doctrine.

But, forgiveness is embarrassing.
 Forgiveness is messy.
 Forgiveness interrupts our lives in ways that we don’t expect or even like.

The person who is forgiven much loves much.
 The person who is forgiven much approaches others with an air of openness and vulnerability. They are not afraid to cry and show affection.

They love much out of the joy of forgiveness.
 And it shows in the way they live their lives.

The woman in our lesson shows her love for Jesus in a very physical way.
 She didn’t say anything. But her actions spoke volumes.
 Her actions were a demonstration of her love.

Even now we might want to look away from this scene.
We can't imagine Jesus being touched in such a way.
It seems so human.

Prophets and Messiahs and especially sons of God need to be a bit more circumspect.
Right?

Or maybe not.
Maybe true faith can be seen when we hug more and talk less.

DO WE SEE?

And maybe truth faith is measured by how we look at each other.
In our lesson Jesus asked Simon, "Do you see this woman?"

When Simon saw the woman, he saw a sinner.
When Jesus looked at the woman, he saw great love.

How do our assumptions get in the way of seeing who someone really is?
Do we look at people through the eyes of judgement?
Or do we look at people through the eyes of love and mercy?

When Simon and his friends see this 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, a daughter of Abraham, a treasured member of the family of faith. She is able to understand the depths of love 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 are actually closer to true sight.

Often when Jesus heals a blind person, 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.
(For example see John 9:39-41)

Simon and his friends were unable to follow Jesus because they thought that they could see.

They thought that they understood the world and how it worked.

But, they were mistaken.

They were blind to the true meaning of faith and to their own need for mercy.

FORGIVEN TO FOLLOW

But, those that were aware of their need for forgiveness do receive it from Jesus.

And more than that they follow Jesus.

In the passage that follows our lesson for today, Luke highlights this.

Not only are the twelve disciples following Jesus. Now there are women who are following Jesus on the road.

These women have been the recipients of God's grace through the ministry of Jesus.

The Bible tells us that they had been cured of "evil spirits and infirmities."
(Luke 8:1-3)

In other words their bodies and their minds had been cured by Jesus.

I believe that when we receive God's forgiveness it sets us free physically and mentally.

And it allows us to follow Jesus instead of the demons of our past.

So, the Bible tells us that these women followed Jesus.

And we also learn that they even provided for Jesus and his ministry out of their own resources.

I wonder if the woman who crashed Simon's party was one of those women?

We don't know.

Luke tells us no more about her.

But, what about us?

What are we prepared to do in response to God's forgiveness and love?

Are we willing to follow a path that is uncertain?

Are we willing to change how we see others?

Are we willing to accept people that we had previously rejected?

Are we willing to risk getting emotional and extravagant because we have been healed at the hands of Jesus?

Maybe God's frozen chosen need to turn off the air conditioning and turn up the heat!

The flame of God's grace can still melt the coldest heart ... even ours.

Amen.