

Go in Peace**Luke 7:36 – 8:3**

At the end of the month Leroy and I are going to Chicago for the retirement party for my best friend from college. On Friday I got an email from my friend's sister with several pictures of our college days. This all got me to thinking about this morning's scripture. You know how it is when you are with old friends and family. They have seen you at your best and your worst. They know about your inappropriate words and behaviors. They have seen you at your ugliest and can tell some stories when others start to tell about your virtues, they have plenty of counter stories to bring you down a peg or two. You see all of us have things in our past and present that we wish we would not have said or done or we wish we could take back. So I go to Chicago with some trepidation and trembling!

Shame is often an underlying factor in great social tragedies such as addiction and violence. Victims of public shame often become such objects of ridicule and shunning that they are dismissed, pushed to the margins of society where no one will miss them. Those who struggle with chronic shame can withdraw into themselves or lash out in rage. Those who struggle with shame cannot escape the label "unworthy." For them, and all of us, Jesus offers forgiveness and acceptance that lifts the heavy burden of shame, allows the forgiveness of self, and offers the freedom of authentic life lived in love and gratitude.

For our scripture this morning I thought this biblical woman was going to tell her story to us, but it is Fathers' Day and I thought there may be some confusion or disappointment if the focus was too much on a woman. So today we will speak as we do most Sunday's where we take the principles of the story and apply it to all of us who hear, whether father or mother, male or female, adult or youth.

One can imagine the occasion. Jesus has arrived for a meal at the home of Simon, a Pharisee. It promises to be an evening of high hospitality. Surely the air is thick with whispers from the crowds who have followed him as they peer through the entranceway, straining for a glimpse of the special guest.

In the midst of this mildly chaotic moment, a woman silently moves forward. Quite invisible to those present, she kneels behind Jesus. This woman risks dire consequences as she creeps forward to touch Jesus. Then something happens to this unnamed woman. Maybe she had a previous encounter with Jesus or John and experienced their message of forgiveness. But instead of shaking with fear and trepidation she begins to weep. Bending low, she tends to Jesus' dusty, dirty feet with her tears. She kisses them and then, clutching the costly oil, gently anoints them. The woman does not use a cloth or the hem of her skirt but, in an intimate gesture of deep love, unfolds her hair and dries the teacher's feet.

Like Jesus, she finds that her reputation has preceded her. Simon's knowledge of her sin implies that, whatever her wrongdoing, it carries with it a public shame. Her low, inward body gesture suggests that she has long been cast out from community gatherings. The shame that she carries has pushed her to the fringes of society and leaves her looking up at the world from a lowly place. Only when she touches Jesus does she become visible to Simon, causing him to decide, "If Jesus were really a prophet, he would know about this woman." With his usual flair for seizing the teachable moment, Jesus offers a parable of forgiven debts to help Simon understand the depth of gratitude experienced when one's costly and heavy burden is lifted. Jesus gently chastises Simon by pointing out that the woman he has judged so unworthy has offered the gifts of hospitality that Simon as host should have provided. Jesus emphasizes this, contrasting the woman's actions and Simon's reception. Simon provided no water, no kiss, and no oil. The woman bathed Jesus with her tears, kissed his feet repeatedly, and used her costly ointment to anoint his feet.

The last thing the woman in this story wishes to do is to find herself as the center of attention. Whatever draws her to Jesus must be stronger than what threatens to expose her. Even Simon's and the community's knowledge cannot deter her. Imagine the courage it takes

to walk into the center of ridicule to express her love and gratitude for Jesus. Before Jesus has even said a word to her, the tears tell us that something has happened. She already knows the power of his love and acceptance. It is an overwhelming moment of gratitude and freedom.

Jesus says, "Your sins are forgiven. ... go in peace" (vv. 48, 50). He is offering more than a forgiveness that merely wipes the slate clean. Jesus' forgiveness lifts the burden of shame, to give her value and worth in spite of how unworthy she felt. This kind of forgiveness allows us to release the moments in time when we feel like failures to ourselves, our families, or our God. For those with chronic shame, forgiveness can open the possibility that one is worth something. This is freedom. Jesus reminds us that this freedom is the gift of a loving God. A heart that is bound by sin and shame withers and dies, but the love of a forgiving God lifts it to heights beyond our greatest dreams and causes it to sing in gratitude. (**M. Jan Holton**)

The setting of the story in Luke's gospel are the proof documents that demonstrate that the statement that Jesus has made at the beginning of his ministry that God has sent him to:

- ¹⁸ "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free,
¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

So the question that Luke is trying to answer, is Jesus a prophetic pretender, or the central figure through whom God inaugurates the hoped-for age of salvation. Luke interweaves the answers in his narrative.

At his dinner for Jesus, Simon was cautious, while the woman saw expressive, giving Jesus the hospitality that Simon failed to give. While Simon gave Jesus no water for cleansing, she gave Jesus the water of her tears. While Simon gave Jesus no kiss of greeting,

the woman continually kissed his feet. While he gave Jesus no oil for anointing, she extensively anointed his feet with ointment (vv. 44-46).

For Simon, the righteousness of God means that God cannot endure sinners, and a follower of God gains salvation by upholding the purity code, with its separation of the elect from the sinners of the world (Lev. 5:2-3; 6:18, 27; 7:20; 22:4-9). Simon judged the woman to be a sinner and himself to be different from and above her in status. He distanced himself from her. Simon also distanced himself from Jesus, whom he disregarded as a prophet because he let the unclean woman touch him (cf. Lev. 15:19-32).

Jesus' response addresses the questions of the nature of righteousness. Countering Simon's contemptuous dismissal, Jesus demonstrated his *divinely given power and authority*. Jesus knew not only the woman's heart, but Simon's thoughts, proving by Simon's own standard that Jesus is *a prophet*. However, Jesus also revealed himself to be one who shared God's (YHWH's) authority to forgive sins (vv. 48-50) and God's (YHWH's) generous intention to heal life, restore relationships, and forgive the sinful (cf. 5:17-26).

Through his parable, Jesus also cleared up *Simon's misunderstanding of the divine righteousness*. Shockingly, the righteousness of God is the generous mercy of God (cf. 6:36), exemplified by the creditor who forgave the debts "by way of gift," by Jesus' attempt to persuade Simon toward a saving change in his perspective, and by Jesus' hospitable reception of the woman's gifts of love and gratitude for her own forgiven debt. Jesus contrasted the righteousness of God with the unrighteousness of human beings. Rooted in the sinful human heart, unrighteousness is *contempt* for self, others, or God, and the resulting lack of graciousness and gratitude in relationships—traits exhibited by Simon, who was unaware of his own need for divine mercy.

The centerpiece of the entire text is Jesus' proclamation that the creditor forgave the debt gratis, not because of anything done by the debtors. God's love and free forgiveness are central. During his ministry, Jesus put into effect the promised forgiveness of God, inaugurating a reconciled relationship with God even before his passion.

Because it is *a relationship*, the new intimacy with God involves a human decision for a renewed connection with God, a decision enacted in repentance and baptism. The capacity for love and gratitude is relationally connected to the ability to receive divine love, grace, and forgiveness, and the woman positively, as Simon negatively, revealed this interconnection.

(Gregory Anderson Love)

Jesus was not condemning his host, but offering to him what he gave to the woman. Both were in the need of God's grace and salvation. The rest of our scripture reminds us of this every fact. As Jesus continued his ministry the disciples and the women that travel with them and supported this are honored as ones who had received God's grace and love. Each of us needs healing from our past, no matter how notable we think our past has been. There was some word, some action that that can only be forgiven by God. The words that God desires to say to each of us: your faith in Jesus has saved you: go in peace.

We are all in need of a savior.

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