

## Loves the Most

### **Luke 7:36 – 8:3**

<sup>36</sup> 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. <sup>37</sup> 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. <sup>38</sup> 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. <sup>39</sup> 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." <sup>40</sup> Jesus spoke up and said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." "Teacher," he replied, "speak." <sup>41</sup> "A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. <sup>42</sup> When they could not pay, he canceled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?" <sup>43</sup> Simon answered, "I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt." And Jesus said to him, "You have judged rightly." <sup>44</sup> 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. <sup>45</sup> You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. <sup>46</sup> You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. <sup>47</sup> 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." <sup>48</sup> Then he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." <sup>49</sup> But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?" <sup>50</sup> And he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

<sup>8:1</sup> Soon afterwards he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, <sup>2</sup> as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, <sup>3</sup> and Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their resources.

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.

We can imagine the occasion. Jesus had arrived for a meal at the home of Simon, a Pharisee. It promised to be an evening of high hospitality. Although the invitation implied a cordial relationship between Jesus and Simon, we cannot but anticipate at least a hint of the tension that usually followed Jesus. Surely the air was 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 that mildly chaotic moment, a woman silently moves forward. Quite invisible to those present, she knelt behind Jesus. Like the woman with the hemorrhage ([Luke 8:43-48](#)), this woman risked dire consequences as she crept forward to touch Jesus. Then something happened to this unnamed woman. Instead of shaking with fear and trepidation she began to weep. Bending low, she tended to Jesus' dusty, dirty feet with her tears. Unloosing her hair, she dried his feet, kissed them, and clutching the costly oil, she gently anointed his feet with ointment. The woman did not use a cloth or the hem of her skirt but, in an intimate gesture of deep love, unfolded her hair and dried the teacher's feet.

Like Jesus, she found that her reputation had 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 suggested that she had long been cast out from community gatherings. The shame that she carried had pushed her to the fringes of society and left her looking up at the world from a lowly place. Only when she touched Jesus did she become visible to Simon, causing him to mutter under his breath, "If Jesus were really a prophet, he would know about this woman." With his usual flair for seizing the teachable moment, Jesus offered a parable of forgiven debts to help Simon understand the depth of gratitude experienced when one's costly heavy burden is lifted. Jesus gently chastised Simon by pointing out that the woman he had judged so unworthy had offered the gifts of hospitality that Simon as host should have provided.

Many of experience shame. Both public shame, as experienced by the woman in this story, and personal chronic shame can have a devastating effect on their victims. Our culture is plagued by social tragedies—like addiction, domestic and sexualized violence, and eating disorders—that are permeated by shame. Shame itself is very complex. It can be a healthy, even helpful, internal gauge that alerts us when we have crossed a personal or social line of appropriateness. Most of us have felt that slight flush of the face and queasiness in our stomach as we remember some social blunder that caused us embarrassment. Sometimes we are shamed by making poor choices and failing others, especially the ones we love.

At another level, victims of adolescent schoolyard bullies can suffer so much harm that shameful moments become etched into the mind, to be relived for decades. Adult bullies can intimidate and ostracize in ways no less cruel than children. In its worst form, shame and humiliation can be used as tools of coercion and manipulation in acts of violence, abuse, and torture.

Chronic shame causes one to be overwhelmed by a sense of self-condemnation and unworthiness. It can take root in a child or an adult, with any event of rejection, failure, or helplessness. For those whose self-esteem is already tattered, it is not long before these failures make us feel as sinful and unclean as the woman in our story. Eventually the constant fear of exposure will lead us to move through the world with a face perpetually cast downward in the ultimate physical shame response. Over time, if severe enough, shoulders will follow suit, slumping forward and causing the whole body to appear as though it is closing in on itself, shutting out the world in the process. Often drugs, alcohol, food, and other destructive behaviors are used to numb the intense feelings of low self-worth that pervade the life of one with chronic shame.

The last thing the woman wished to do was to find herself as the center of attention. Whatever draws her to Jesus must have been stronger than what

threatened to expose her. Even Simon's snide mutterings could not deter her. Imagine the courage it took to walk into the center of ridicule to express her love and gratitude for Jesus. Before Jesus had even said a word to her, the tears told that something had happened. She already knew the power of his love and acceptance. It was an overwhelming moment of gratitude and freedom.

Jesus said, "Your sins are forgiven. . . . go in peace" (vv. 48, 50). He was offering more than a forgiveness that merely wiped the slate clean. Jesus' forgiveness lifted 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. In fact, that one is worth quite a lot. 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**

Through her compassionate act of generosity in bathing his feet with her tears and drying them with her hair, she demonstrates abundant love. Her love for Jesus becomes the sign of God's extravagant love for us. It was Simon who said: one who is forgiven little loves little and those forgiven much love much. Let us show our love to our forgiving and merciful God.

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