

## Proper 6C 2016 Sermon

### *Luke 7:36-8:3*

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

*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, as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their resources.*

Jesus is invited to a meal at the home of Simon the Pharisee.

Into this gathering comes a woman, whom Luke tells us is “a sinner.” We don’t know the *nature* of her sin; what is important to Luke’s story is simply that she is **known** in that town as a sinner. Now, the mere presence of a notorious sinner at the Pharisee’s dinner party would be upsetting enough, but the woman takes her place at Jesus’ feet, weeping, and begins to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. She continually kisses his feet and anoints them with the ointment she has brought.

What prompts this woman's audacity? What causes her to offer such a public display of devotion? Simon the Pharisee doesn't bother to ask himself such questions; he is not interested in *why* this woman is acting in this manner. He simply rushes to judgment – judgment of both the woman and Jesus. He says to himself, "If this man [Jesus] *were* a prophet, he would have known who and what *kind* of woman this is who is touching him -- that she is a sinner."

Do we recognize ourselves in Simon's attitude? Do **we** not, more often than we'd like to admit, do the same thing – rush to judgment of another person as our first response, without bothering to ask where that person is coming from?

"Pharisees are well known to be obsessed with externals," writes Fr. John Shea. "Therefore, [Simon sees that] what is happening is an unclean woman has touched Jesus and made **him** unclean. The tears, hair, kisses, ointment, and feet are not mentioned [by Simon]... In fact, he does not even *see* a concrete individual woman. Rather, he perceives a member of a class, a *kind* of woman, a sinner." <sup>1</sup>

Again, do you and I not do the same? Rather than seeing a human being, we see a *class* of person: "Homeless." "Black." "Refugee." "Muslim." "Homosexual." "Immigrant." "Conservative." "Liberal." We **start** with the *classification*, the judgment, the labeling; not with the human being. This is *tribal* consciousness, not **Christ**-consciousness.

In our Gospel story, Jesus isn't **interested** in what *kind* of woman she is – he isn't interested in *labeling* her, classifying her. What Jesus sees is this individual woman's heart, and what he sees **in** her heart is overwhelming gratitude and extravagant love.

Jesus also sees into Simon's heart, and he knows what Simon is thinking. So he asks Simon a question that takes the form of a parable: "Who do you think would be more grateful – a man whose debt of five hundred denarii was cancelled or the one only forgiven fifty?"

Simon answers, "I *suppose* the one for whom he canceled the greater debt." Simon has to *suppose* because he has never himself *experienced* the sense of being deeply forgiven. John Shea writes: "[Simon] is *guessing* at the obvious math rather than **feeling** the gut-wrenching recognition of the movement from hopelessness to hope, from deadness to life. It is just this failure of deep living, of never having been pulled from the pit, that makes Jesus' *second* question so difficult, 'Do you **see** this woman?' ...Simon, who has never known forgiveness so deep it can release extravagant love, does not answer. He may see a '*kind* of woman.' But he *cannot* see and does not know this overflowing fountain of tears, hair, perfume, and kisses." <sup>2</sup>

Professor David Lose has some profound insight into what is going on in this passage. I quote him at some length: “[The woman] is overcome by gratitude, the kind of gratitude understood only by someone who has been given everything.

“But is forgiveness really everything? Can it possibly be worth that much? Consider: forgiveness at heart is the restoration of relationship. It is releasing any claim on someone else for some past injury or offense. That’s why the analogy to a debt works so well. Forgiveness cancels relational debt and opens up the future. Which is why it’s **so** important, **so** valuable.

“But it’s also something more. Forgiveness also gives you back yourself. You see, after a while, being indebted, owing others, knowing yourself first and foremost as a sinner -- these realities come to dominate and define you. You are no more and no less than what you’ve done, the mistakes you’ve made, the debt you owe. When you are forgiven, all those limitations disappear and you are restored, renewed, set free. [Forgiveness also releases the person who has been harboring a grudge or holding onto a hurt from the isolating prison of their own self-righteousness or victimhood and opens them to the flow of God’s grace.]

“...[Y]es, forgiveness **is** everything...

“So this story is about forgiveness. And it’s about the gratitude that forgiveness creates. And it’s about the extravagant acts of love and devotion that gratitude prompts.

“But [the story is] also about something else: it’s about hardness of heart as opposed to love, about judgment *instead* of forgiveness, and about a sense of entitlement instead of gratitude.

“Notice that [Jesus’] telling this short parable would have been enough. The parable explains *why* the woman is acting as she is: she is like one who has had five hundred denarii – well over a year’s wages – forgiven her. [Telling Simon that parable] would have been enough; but Jesus doesn’t stop there.

“Instead, he compares *her* actions of extravagant hospitality with those of Simon. [Jesus] changes his focus... from *her* devotion to *Simon’s* neglect... Her extravagance only magnifies Simon’s utter lack of hospitality, not providing even the minimum of what a good host would normally offer a guest.

“Why this change of focus [from the woman to Simon]? Because the truth Jesus points to cuts both ways. It’s not only that one who has been forgiven much loves much..., it’s that the one who is forgiven little loves little.

“...Or [perhaps, better said, it is that they] *don’t notice* [that they’ve **been** forgiven]. Perhaps don’t even think they need it. Who knows – perhaps they even disdain forgiveness as something for others, for those like this woman who

is clearly a sinner, clearly beneath them, and so clearly in need of forgiveness. But them? Need forgiveness? Hardly!

“It’s a great story, isn’t it. And [the story isn’t] over.

“I mean, it’s one thing to explore the narrative contours and dynamics [of this Bible passage], but it’s another to recognize that this story is being played out even as we read it. Because here’s the thing: most of us, while we’re reading, pick up pretty quickly that Simon is the bad guy here, the one who is judgmental and isn’t really into Jesus’ forgiveness. And so, quite naturally, we find ourselves judging Simon. And then, all of a sudden -- BAM -- we realize we **are** Simon, with the same penchant to go searching for the splinters in our neighbor’s eye rather than pull out the plank in our own.”<sup>3</sup>

Simon believes that **he** is free, and the **woman** is in bondage to sin; but in reality, the opposite is true: it is the woman who, having been forgiven much, is free and loves with abandon; while Simon the Pharisee, who does not think himself in need of forgiveness and is therefore **not** open to the flow of grace, is *not* free, but is imprisoned in his own closed system of judging and classifying the world and everyone in it. The very word “Pharisee” means “separated one,” and being separated, cut off – from oneself, from others, and from God – is the very definition of sin.

“Jesus held up the overflowing life of the woman as a mirror to Simon,” writes John Shea. “He wanted [Simon] to see himself as he was and himself as he could be. He wanted to lead [Simon] to decision’s edge. Jesus is not a sad or angry prophet. He is an invitation to fullness.”<sup>4</sup>

Jesus offers you and me that same invitation to fullness. He holds up to us Simon, caught in his own prison of classifying and judging others, thinking himself righteous but cutting himself off from relationships and from the flow of grace; and on the other hand, he holds up to us the overflowing life of this flawed but forgiven woman. And he asks us, in effect: Which are you? and which do you *want* to be?

AMEN

<sup>1</sup> John Shea, *The Relentless Widow*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2006, p. 159

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 161

<sup>3</sup> David Lose, “Forgiveness and Gratitude,” *Dear Working Preacher*, June 09, 2013, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?m=4377&post=2601>

<sup>4</sup> Shea, *ibid.*, p. 164