

C Ordinary 11  
2013 June 16  
Luke 7.36-50  
"At the Pharisee's House"

A woman bought a parrot for a pet. Unfortunately the parrot turned out to be very rude and was constantly insulting the woman, commenting on her appearance and her intelligence and whatever. One day the woman finally had enough. She opened the freezer door, pitched the parrot in, and slammed the door. After a few minutes the woman was overcome with remorse, ran to the freezer and pulled out the chilled but alive parrot. The parrot said, "I'm very sorry. I apologize for my bad behavior and promise you there will be no more of that. From now on, I will be a respectful and kind." The woman thanked the parrot and told him he was forgiven. The parrot said "Thank you". Then he said, "Can I ask you something?" She said, "Yes, What?" The parrot looked at the freezer, shuddered, and asked, "What did the chicken do?"

Today we spend some time considering the topic of forgiveness, but not human forgiveness. We look at the amazing forgiveness we receive from the living God.

Luke records three different times when Jesus is invited to dine with Pharisees, in chapters 7, 11, and 14. In fact, among all the gospels Luke is the only one who records Jesus having dinner with Pharisees. There's probably something going on there, in Luke's understanding of who Jesus is. Maybe Jesus loves Pharisees, too, and longs for them to see him for who he is.

The story of Jesus being anointed by a woman appears in all four of the gospels. There are some differences among those four accounts. For our purposes today, be aware that only Luke describes the woman as a "sinner" and only Luke has the anointing take place in Galilee, before Jesus begins his journey towards the cross.

And finally, be aware that the ancient church tradition of Mary Magdalene being the woman, and somehow thereby making her a sinner or prostitute, has no basis whatsoever in scripture. In none of the four accounts is the woman Mary Magdalene, and we have no reason to believe she was a prostitute.

Jesus is invited to Simon's house for dinner. From the entire text we can gather that while Simon issued the invitation, he really didn't go out of his way to make Jesus feel welcome. Later we find that he offered Jesus no water to wash his feet, no kiss, no oil for his head. The evidence we have indicates that the kiss and the oil were not customary for guests, but the water certainly was. Simon neglects this common Middle Eastern expression of hospitality. Why? Is it because he is not sure Jesus deserves it? Does he have contempt for Jesus, even though he invited him to dinner? Did he offer water to his other guests? We simply don't know.

The evidence indicates that this banquet was held in an inner courtyard of Simon's house, or a large banquet room. It was not at all uncommon in those times for the exterior doors to be left open during banquets, and people who were not invited to the table would sometimes come and go throughout the evening, listening to part of the

conversation. Therefore it is not improbable that this woman, whom Luke identifies as a “sinner” would enter the house with her alabaster jar of ointment.

As you probably know, most upper class Jews had adopted the banquet routine of the Greeks, whereby the guests reclined at a very low table, perhaps a foot off the ground, resting on one arm while they used the other hand to serve and feed themselves. Therefore, the feet of all the guests would have been pointed away from the low table.

The unnamed woman is identified only as a sinner. We cannot know exactly what her sin is, but the common conjecture that she is a prostitute or adulterer may be correct. She might well have been either one.

Picture carefully the scene. The woman comes in and kneels at Jesus' feet. We can imagine her being there for some minutes. The conversation in the room may very well have fallen silent, or at least subdued, at her entrance. The people at the table, and especially Simon, know what she is. After some time her tears begin to fall. She cannot control them. She cannot stop them. She probably didn't come to the banquet with the intention of breaking down in tears, but that's what happens.

After more time passes, she lets down her long hair, and begins to dry Jesus' feet, while the tears continue to fall. Then she begins to gently kiss his feet, and finally opens her alabaster jar and pours the costly perfume on them, massaging the oil into the skin. And probably she continues weeping and kissing.

Simon is aghast and horrified. To himself he says, this man cannot be the prophet people say he is. If he were a prophet he would know what kind of woman this is, a sinner, and he would castigate her and chase her away. Jesus knows what Simon is thinking.

He tells Simon a very simple, very bare parable about two men who are in debt, one who owed 50 denarii and the other 500 denarii to their master. The master forgives both debts because neither debtor can pay. Jesus asks Simon, which debtor do you think will love their master more? Simon, sensing a trap, replies, I suppose the one with the greater debt. Jesus says, you have answered correctly.

Simon, he says, do you see this woman? You offered me no water for my feet when I entered your house, but she has not stopped bathing my feet with her tears and wiping them with her hair. You offered me no kiss, but she continues to kiss my feet. You offered me no oil for my head, but she has anointed my feet. I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven. Hence, she has shown great love.

Guess what? Jesus is a prophet after all! He did know the woman was a sinner. For that matter, he knew what Simon was thinking about her. But for Jesus, it doesn't matter that she is a sinner. What matters is that she has been forgiven.

And here's the important part. The woman is not forgiven because she comes to Jesus, bathes his feet with her tears, wipes them with her hair, kisses them, and anoints them with oil. Those actions do not prompt her forgiveness. They are the love that she demonstrates in response for her forgiveness. Somehow, in some way that Luke does

not tell us, she has already sensed her forgiveness, perhaps, some scholars think, in being baptized by Jesus' cousin John. They think that because in the verses preceding this reading, there is an extended passage about John. We cannot know for sure.

But somehow, the woman, whose sins were many, has received forgiveness from God and has embraced that forgiveness. She comes to Jesus to anoint his head, but cannot reach his head. She sits at his feet with her jar, and the tears simply begin to fall. Not because she is ashamed, but because she has been forgiven. And she knows it. So she weeps. She does not come to receive forgiveness from Jesus. She comes to respond to the forgiveness she has already received. Overcome with thankfulness, she weeps.

Jesus then, as is his practice, says something difficult to Simon. If someone is forgiven only a little, he or she will love only a little. We are tempted to think that those of us whose sins are not so great, and therefore have little for which to be forgiven, must then be doomed to love only a little. But that is not the right way to interpret the saying. In fact, of course, all of us have sinned much. Therefore all of us have much for which to be forgiven. Therefore all of us have this huge reserve of love to return to God, for God's amazing grace expressed to us.

You remember the definition of a Pharisee, right? Nice, religious folks like us. Nice, religious folks like us who tend to judge those whose sins are more visible, more obvious, more apparent. Nice, religious folks like us who are so quick to find fault in others and slow to see our own sinfulness. That was Simon's problem. It wasn't that he had very little for which to seek forgiveness, and therefore was doomed to love only a little. It was that he was so busy pointing out the sin in others that he couldn't see his own sin, of which judgmentalism was a big one.

To the woman, Jesus says, Your sins have been forgiven. Your faith has saved you. Go in peace. Remember well that the woman's faith is not explicitly what has saved her. God's forgiveness is what has saved her. What she has is faith that she has indeed been forgiven. That's something you and I also don't get sometimes. We find it hard to forgive ourselves, so we don't think God can forgive us. It's the opposite of claiming that we have no sin. But God can and does forgive all kinds of sins, even ones we consider to be horrendous. Even our own horrendous sins.

We are not saved by our faith, nor by anything else we can do. We cannot earn God's forgiveness. That's a free gift. But there is this kind of dance between God's forgiveness and our loving response, that goes on throughout our lives in Christ. That love, of course, must of necessity spill out on those around us, or there is no evidence that we have been forgiven, that we know we have been forgiven, and that we love God deeply in return.

The unnamed woman knows it. She is so deeply thankful, she can't contain her tears. Imagine the scene as Jesus finally addresses her personally. Your sins have been forgiven. Your faith has saved you. Go in peace.