

Seeing Beyond Sin – June 12, 2016

Luke 7:36-8:3

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If you're a fan of the theatre, our lesson from Luke's gospel comes across very much like a one-act play. One extended scene that is chock full of powerful characters, lots of drama as various social classes and expectations collide, and ends with a powerful and completely unexpected twist. Unexpected if you don't know Jesus.

The setting finds us in the dining room of an upper-income home at a gathering of men, seated in the Roman fashion of reclining on cushions on the floor around a low table. There are three main characters. Simon the Pharisee, is an educated man, a scholar in the Jewish Law with a curiosity that compels him to invite this itinerant rabbi into his home not simply for a meal, but more for what he undoubtedly hopes will be an engaging discussion of the important issues of life and the world at large.

Jesus of Nazareth is the guest of honor, who is able to see beyond the surface of any given situation or individual. Next is the woman with the alabaster jar. She has no name, and though she does not speak, her actions provide the conflict of this drama. And finally are the other men who have gathered for the meal – perhaps some are Pharisees and others are disciples. They have come for the promise of good food and deep debate. They are witnesses to the action as it unfolds before them.

Our drama begins with a simple invitation. Simon the Pharisee offers to Jesus a meal in his home. Immediately we are alerted to potential conflict. We know from other stories in the gospels that Pharisees are often cast as foils to Jesus and his teachings. And so we anticipate that something more than a civil meal is about to take place. While we are unsure of Simon's motivations, it appears that he was looking to satisfy his intellectual curiosity.

Dinner is progressing smoothly, as food is passed around and conversation begins to flow. And then she arrives. The Woman with the Alabaster Jar. Tension among the men is immediately evident. Conversation halts, heads turn. Some faces exhibit shock, others disapproval. And this is more than simply a random female interrupting an all-male dinner party. There is something more.

Perhaps it is in her stance. Imagine, if you will. Eyes downcast, shoulders hunched. Yet if it is shame that she is feeling, at that moment, her desire to approach Jesus is much stronger, pushing her to defy rationality. Willing her to face her accusers. She knows her reputation precedes her, whatever her sin. We do not know. But the men know. And she knows that they know. She comes into the dining area, at first standing behind Jesus, and then she drops to the floor.

By now tears are streaming from her eyes. She cries at his feet. Her tears begin to pool, mingling with the dust that coats his travel worn feet. She has no cloth with which to wipe them, so she undoes her hair. She uses her hair to wipe away the tears and the dust. And then she opens the alabaster jar, full of expensive oil. She kisses his feet and anoints them with the oil.

The room is understandably silent, except for the weeping of the woman. The moments slip by. The other men begin to shift uncomfortably at the table, some averting their eyes from the scene. They feel embarrassment and shock. Why doesn't Jesus stop her, they wonder. Even we the audience get a bit ill at ease at the scene unfolding before our eyes. It is as if we are witnesses to something just a bit much for our minds to comprehend. The feelings are too strong, the emotions too intense, the actions too strange.

And then there is our host Simon who is taking it all in. He cocks his head, takes a deep breath and considers Jesus. Perhaps this rabbi is NOT the marvel everyone claims him to be. If he were, he would surely know that this woman is a sinner and certainly does not belong here, let alone showing such intimacy toward Jesus. Some prophet he is!

Jesus is the only one not shocked by this episode. This is not to say that he is not moved, for he is certainly moved by her actions, however extreme they might be. For unlike everyone else, Jesus understands her extravagant gesture, not as an otherwise inappropriate display, but rather a cry for reconciliation and a plea for forgiveness. She very well may be a sinner, as we all are, but she also recognizes her need to be forgiven and knows the one to whom she must go. And Jesus accepts her as she is, not pulling back, not turning away, but welcoming her to him.

Here we see an image of God's immense, unconditional love for us. Undaunted or undisturbed. In our sinfulness, in our brokenness, in those very vulnerable moments when emotions run deep, we fully bear ourselves before God. And God takes us as we are.

We humans have a hard time with forgiveness. It is often difficult for us to forgive others – we hold onto our pain, our hurt. We nurse grudges, and maybe even demand a bit of payback. But not for Jesus. Not for God. Forgiveness comes naturally and freely. Like the men in this scene, we sometimes pull back from the brokenness of others. We cannot witness the immense power of this letting go. But God never blinks.

To see it so freely offered and graciously given, it is almost too much for us to bear. That God can look beyond the sin, and see the repentant sinner. A pretty amazing thing.

We have a hard time with this forgiveness thing. Not only in our attitude toward others who have wronged us, but when we take a good, hard look at our own wrongs. In our brains, we may

understand the logic of the concept of being justified by faith in Jesus Christ, not through our works. We know and we believe that it is through Christ – his life, death, and resurrection – that we are reconciled to God.

In the work of Christ, we find unity with God. And it is by faith in Jesus Christ that our sins are forgiven. Not by any works. Even those sins, hidden deep within us, that cause us to weep and crouch at the feet of Jesus, longing for mercy and grace.

But in reality, we have a hard time thinking that God will forgive us, “just because.” We feel we have to earn it. We have to deserve it. And we know we can’t. So what do we do? We hold onto our sin. We beat ourselves up over it. We try to bargain with ourselves and God, to do better, to be better. And of course, we still fail.

Have you ever found yourselves caught up in a cycle of guilt? Do you hear that voice in your head that likes to say the words “should” and “ought.” That voice of guilt and shame keeps us from hearing the voice of free and unconditional grace and love. It keeps us trapped in our sin.

Now, heading back to Simon’s dining room, not only does Jesus recognize this woman and her desperate need to be forgiven, but he can also sense the condemnation rolling through Simon’s mind. When Simon says to himself, this is no prophet! He doesn’t even realize that this woman is a sinner! Yet in an ironic turn, Jesus knows exactly who this woman is and what she needs!

Jesus responds calmly to his host, gazing directly into Simon’s surprised eyes. “Simon, I have something to say to you,” Jesus begins, and then he tells a story.

The parable is simple and straightforward. A creditor has two debtors, one who owes a lot of money and one who owes considerably less. Neither of them could pay, so the creditor cancels both debts. In the end, the one with the greater debt loved the creditor more. On this, Jesus and Simon agree.

And then Jesus begins to interpret the parable in light of the events which have taken place. Jesus points out that Simon neglected his host duties – no water to wash his feet, no kiss of greeting when Jesus arrived, no oil to anoint his head – all typical actions of a Jewish host toward his guests. This woman, this so-called sinner, on the other hand, has shown extravagant love toward Jesus. Cleansing his dusty feet with tear-soaked hair, kissing him in gratitude, and anointing his feet with costly oil.

She, with her greater sinfulness, has shown tremendous love and gratitude for receiving forgiveness. Yet Simon, thinking himself to be righteous, is perhaps not even aware of his need for forgiveness. We are good people, solid, outstanding citizens – certainly there are many folks

out there who've done a heap more sinning than we have! Does our so-called goodness blind us to our need to be forgiven and our resultant expression of gratitude toward the God who forgives us so freely?

"The one to whom little is forgiven loves little," Jesus says.

With that pronouncement, Jesus turns to the woman and tells her that she is forgiven. Her sins, whatever they are, have been wiped away like the dust on his feet, and she is free to go and live a new life in the assurance of God's grace. This is a new beginning for her. She needn't be weighed down any longer with shame or guilt. She can shut off those inner voices and their continual condemnation.

Simon, on the other hand, has a lot to think about. As do the other men around the table, who look to one another in amazement. "Who is this that even forgives sins?" For Simon and these others, the story is left open-ended.

When Simon invited the strange preacher over for dinner that evening, it was to satisfy his intellectual curiosity. Debating the law, discussing the world, maybe a little complaining about the Roman Empire. Safe topics of conversation. Yet instead he was confronted by the woman with the alabaster jar, and all the uncomfortable personal drama she brought with her. Digging a little too deep around issues a little too personal.

Most of us can probably relate pretty well with Simon. When it comes to Christ, it is safer to focus on our intellectual concerns. What could be better than a simple dinner party with Jesus as the guest of honor? Don't we all carry around that laundry list of questions that we'd love to one day ask Jesus? But then there is also that part of us that holds onto the alabaster jar. That part of us that knows the pain of our sin and struggles to name the darkness within our souls.

Deep down, underneath the façade, we understand shame and guilt. We long for forgiveness and for reconciliation. We yearn to know the one who knows us better than anyone else – in fact, knows us better than we know ourselves – to be able to bear ourselves, fully vulnerable before the one who loves us without condition. To drop to his feet and shower him with our awkward gratitude, knowing he will never turn away.