

“Forgiveness”

Luke 7: 36-8:3

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CCUMC

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Introduction before reading

Our story today continues with the prior units in chapter seven on the healing of the centurion’s servant and the raising of the widow of Nain’s son; today’s text also reveals Jesus as a prophet in line with Israel’s greatest prophets—but also as more than a prophet. Jesus not only knows Simon the Pharisee’s thoughts, he is able to forgive sins—which is an act that only God can do. In this sermon, we’re going to look at forgiveness in two parts: first of the woman, and secondly of Simon, the Pharisee. This story is going to sound somewhat familiar—I acted it out during Lent. It is found in all the gospels, but Mark, Matthew, and John place the story in Bethany during the Passover, leading up to the crucifixion. Only Luke uses it to develop the relationship between forgiveness and love.

Reading of Luke 7: 36-8:3

Part I—Those who need forgiveness

“Her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love.” This is part one—God’s gracious forgiveness of the woman with the alabaster jar. First of all, let’s clarify this woman as a sinner. In the Jewish context, the designation of sinner would indicate someone who is not faithful to God’s law—a transgressor of the Torah. This designation is used often in the gospel of Luke. Peter exclaims in Luke 5:8 to Jesus, “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man.” In Luke 5: 30-32 Jesus says that he has come to call sinners to repentance, while in 15:2 the Pharisees moan that Jesus welcomes sinners and eats with them.

Sadly, though, male commentators throughout history have assumed this woman is a prostitute. The exegetical tradition on this text focuses on woman as only a sexual sinner—which shows more where their minds were than what the actual text says. (this is where we need women reading the Bible) Luke doesn't use that designation of that specific sin—as he does use in 15:30. The more textually correct reading is that this woman has broken some kind of public religious law, and is, like Peter and many others, a recipient of God's grace as a sinner.¹

Whatever she did that everybody else seems to know about, she stood in need of grace and forgiveness. She was in dire straits, in deep difficulty. She experienced God's forgiveness prior to this event; she was responding to the love and grace she had already received from a previous meeting with Jesus. Jesus restored her to her community, and opened up the future to her. This is what forgiveness does—it restores relationship. Forgiveness gave her back herself; she had come to know herself by only her mistakes, only her limitations. Jesus' forgiveness set her free, restored her to who she really is.

No wonder she wanted to lavish thanksgiving upon the one who had given her life back. No wonder she had the incredible courage to party crash a private dinner party, where she certainly wasn't invited. She walked around the guests, carrying her common little perfume jar. The esteemed guests were all reclining on pillows on the floor, supported by their left arms, eating with their right hands the food spread before them on a mat. Their feet would have extended away from the mat. She stepped over several sets of feet before coming to Jesus'. She violated all kinds of social conventions as she let down her hair, as she touched a man's feet, as she wept at a dinner party where no one would show such emotional weakness. (maybe you've been to a few of these stuffy dinner parties where

¹ Jeannine K. Brown, "Lectionary on Luke: 7: 36-8:3" workingpreacher. Org Accessed on June 11, 2013

everyone acts like life is perfect—completely boring). This woman has created a scene. But for her she has created a scene of love, and love wins over any kind of stuffy social convention. She is lavishing love and tears and perfume for the one who has first given her love. Jesus says, “Her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love.”

Perhaps you could kneel with this woman at Jesus’ feet. Perhaps there is or was sin of yours that has held you captive---and the grace of God sets you free. Forgiveness restores you to relationship, cancels your debt. You are no longer only the mistakes you’ve made. You are awash in God’s grace, grace mixed with tears and perfume from an alabaster jar. Jesus can say to you, “Your sins, which were many, have been forgiven; show great love.”

Part II---Those who need to show forgiveness

The rest of us, though—most likely the majority of us---recline with Simon on the mat in all our comforts. Simon is a Pharisee, a teacher of the religious law. He is one to whom Jesus says, “the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.” Simon’s problem was his attitude and understanding; he didn’t recognize his need for forgiveness.² He had loved little because he had experienced so little of God’s love. He has, in his own self-reliance, distanced himself from his need for God and God’s grace. Perhaps he even disdains forgiveness as something for other people who break the Torah, the law—not for such a fine upstanding person as himself.

And yet, if we cannot admit our need, we cannot receive the remedy for our lack. We cannot experience the gratitude of those who have received God’s grace. We then are unable to love with the abandon of the woman with the alabaster jar.³

² Alan Culpepper, “Luke” *New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary*

³ David Lose, “Lectionary Commentary” workingpreacher.org

Simon loves little because he's never fully learned God's love for him. He invites guests over, but shows them little love—he offers none of the traditional practices of hospitality to his guests—no footwashing, no oil for anointing. Simon feels himself sufficient on his own, so that he never fully knows the joy of giving and receiving.

Simon can come out as the bad guy in this story; it's easy to judge him for not loving more. . . (C'mon Simon! Just open yourself to God's love!) Until we realize that maybe we've got a little bit of Simon in us. Perhaps you hold yourself aloof sometimes from the annoying and mistake-prone rest of humanity. Perhaps you hold back from opening to God's love, because to do so would break you open—and that's too scary. Perhaps it's easier to hold nice dinner parties where everyone talks nicely and eats well, than to have a mess of a woman crash your party with weepy gratitude. Jesus says, “the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.”

Even more, Jesus is urging Simon not only to open to God's forgiveness for him, but also to learn how to practice forgiveness to others, rather than simply adjudicating the law. Jesus wants Simon to experience God's grace by being grace to others. Jesus wants Simon to forgive much, so that he learns how to love much. Jesus wants Simon to forgive this woman with the alabaster jar, too, because such forgiveness will set Simon free from his own prison of judgmentalism and self-righteousness. If Simon can forgive as Christ does, Simon becomes free to really flourish in love.

Desmond Tutu, the leader of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, writes powerfully on being the grace of Jesus to others in his book, *No Future without Forgiveness*. He writes, “True forgiveness deals with the past, all of the past, to make the future possible. In forgiving, people are not being asked to forget. Forgiveness does not mean condoning what has been done. It means taking what happened seriously and not

minimizing it; drawing out the sting in the memory that threatens to poison our entire existence. It involves trying to understand the perpetrators and so have empathy, to try to stand in their shoes and appreciate the sort of pressures and influences that might have conditioned them. Forgiveness is not being sentimental. Forgiving means abandoning your right to pay back the perpetrator in his own coin, but it is a loss that liberates the victim.”⁴ Desmond Tutu goes on to explain that for the process of forgiveness to really succeed, it is invaluable for the culprit to acknowledge the truth of having wronged someone. This requires the wrongdoer realizing he has done something wrong, feeling some contrition, confessing the wrong, and asking for forgiveness. This requires a fair measure of humility, though, and not everyone can muster this. Tutu references that Jesus didn’t wait until those who were nailing them to the cross asked forgiveness—because they didn’t. He prayed to God to forgive them. “If the victim could forgive only when the culprit confessed, then the victim would be locked into the culprit’s whim, locked into victimhood.” Tutu, and Jesus in our text today, encourages us to forgive because she who is forgiven much, loves much.

There is a story of three veterans standing in front of the Vietnam Memorial in Washington D.C. One asks, “Have you forgiven those who held you prisoner of war?” “I will never forgive them,” replies the other. His comrade says, “Then it seems they still have you in prison, don’t they?” With forgiveness, this soldier and the other Simons of the world learn to love. With forgiveness, the sinner and the one sinned against become free, restored, able to truly be whole. Whether the woman with the perfume jar or Simon, Jesus can say to all of us, “Your sins, which were many, have been forgiven; show great love.” Thanks be to God. Amen

⁴ Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 292, 271-271.

