

The Mark of Forgiveness

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Luke 7: 36 – 8:3

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Laurel Thatche Ulrich once said, “Well behaved women rarely make history,” and that seems to be the case in our gospel reading today. We don’t know a great deal about this woman—we don’t even know her name. What we do know is that she was “a woman in the city,” and that she “was a sinner.”

For years, folks have assumed this woman was a prostitute because she lived in the city and was a sinner. That really is rather absurd, as well as rather sexist to immediately draw that conclusion. If we look back 2 chapters in Luke, to Luke 5:8, we can read about Jesus calling Peter to be his disciple. Remember what Jesus did? He filled Peter’s nets with fish. When Peter saw the net, “he fell down at Jesus’ knees, saying, ‘Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!’” Would you assume Peter to be a prostitute because he is sinful? Like I said, “absurd.”

This unnamed woman with the alabaster jar joins the company of all of us who want to serve Jesus Christ. We all are broken, sinful beings—flawed just like Peter and flawed like the woman in this passage. She gives us hope that we too can be and *are* part of God’s continuing story.

Let’s look for a minute how this woman even ended up at this dinner party Simon the Pharisee was hosting. Simon had heard about Jesus and he was rather skeptical about what he had heard. So—he invited him to a dinner party. Dinner parties were often occasion for theological and philosophical conversations, so Simon made the invitation to find out more about Jesus and his teachings.

Hospitality was always expected from the host at a dinner party. A greeting with a kiss, perhaps, surely a foot washing, and maybe an anointing with oil. Simon did none of these things. It was if Simon were saying, “Great of you to stop by, Jesus, but you won’t be staying for long.”ⁱ

Banquet tables in that day were low to the floor and the diners reclined around the table on large cushions with their feet extending slightly away from the table.

Dinner parties were normally held outside in the homeowner’s courtyard area where it was cooler, so it was not unusual at all for town folk to wander by, to stand on the periphery of the action and listen to the conversation. It was free, and pretty interesting entertainment. This most likely is how the woman came to be a part of this gathering. It was not really so much her presence that was shocking, but her actions.

This woman, unlike Simon and his mere curiosity, did have a motive to see Jesus. Perhaps she had heard Jesus teaching in the town and wanted to hear more. Perhaps she was there for another specific motive.

You know many days when I was sitting in Greek or Hebrew class in seminary, I would ask myself why I really needed these classes. Well, this is one instance when I can tell you why. In the passage, the original language makes it pretty clear why the woman was there. Let's look at verse 47—"her sins, which were many, **have been** forgiven." You see, whatever sins the woman may have committed, had already been forgiven, as indicated by used of this particular tense of verb. God had already forgiven the woman, and after receiving such forgiveness, of course she would want to celebrate with Jesus what God had already done. This was done by her extravagant acts of love, her tears, the loosing of her hair to dry his feet and the anointing with the costly oil.

You see, the woman's love was not the *reason* she had received forgiveness, but a *byproduct* of that forgiveness. Likewise, it was not her kindness or love she gave to Jesus that saved her—it was her faith.

This story is full of contrasts; contrasts between the unnamed woman and the named Pharisee, Simon. Simon was not willing to meet his hospitality obligation to his guest—the woman was. Oh she didn't show him the usual acts of hospitality in the *normal or accepted* manner, but she did do it.

Have you ever spontaneously started crying? I mean those times when you think everything is going along fine, you are in the midst of whatever you are doing, and the tears just start? I know I have.

Again, when I was in seminary, we had chapel service twice a week, and we got to experience many different styles and forms of worship. One afternoon, there was a liturgical dance being presented as the Scripture was being read. I was thinking to my self how I had always considered liturgical dance to be kind of "out there" and not something that really needed to be going on during *worship*! However, I was also noticing how much I was enjoying the dance and how the dancer's movements really did express and almost interpret the Word that was being read. Before I knew it, was just sobbing.

Since that time, I have thought many times about tears and why we get them when we do. I believe tears serve several different purposes. One, I think tears—especially the unexpected ones like I experienced, are a way of God getting our attention. I think they are ways that God says to us, "Hey! Pay attention to what is going on in your life at this very moment, during this particular second in time. It's important!"

Frederick Buechner says those tears "are not only telling you something about the secret of who you are, but more often than not God is speaking to you through them of the mystery of where you have come from and is summoning you to where . . . you should go next."ⁱⁱⁱ

I also think our tears are God's way of cleansing our souls from hurt or disappointment or pain in our lives. I think of them sometimes as a liquid form of the Holy Spirit, washing over me, cleansing, and making me whole and well once again.

I imagine this unnamed woman also experienced some of those things. Her tears may have surprised her, too, and maybe the only thing she had to dry Jesus' feet with was her hair, which you may or may not realize, but was **very** scandalous! To touch a man was pretty bold, but to loose one's hair and wipe and kiss his feet—unheard of!

What is so amazing about his story is how Jesus responds. His response to both Simon and the woman is absolutely need specific and appropriate for each individual.

It is through Jesus' response that we can take our lesson for today as well. We all could use some cultivation of seeing the way Jesus saw.

- Jesus saw the need—not the label. He saw the woman's need for unconditional acceptance. Can we do that? Look for the need and not necessarily label the person who has the need?
- Jesus responded with compassion and not prejudice. He forgave her sins a second time and sent her off in peace.
- Jesus put care for another human being above convention. Yes—it was highly unorthodox for this woman to come and kiss his feet, to wipe them with her hair and to anoint his feet with costly perfume. Jesus saw the person, though, and not society's norms. The woman provides an image of love that cannot be limited to what is proper.ⁱⁱⁱ
- Jesus was able to hold opposing energies, if you will, in one room at the same time and minister to them both in their own need specific way. He taught Simon about forgiveness and love, while at the same time accepting the woman for who she is.^{iv}

You see, the beauty of a forgiven life is not that our love for Christ is a compulsory or mandatory love, any more than this woman's anointing of Jesus' feet was a duty-driven act. When we are forgiven, love comes naturally to us. We want to love others as we love ourselves; we want to be here on Sunday mornings to honor and worship God and to show God our extravagant love.

The mark of a forgiven person
is their love for God
and for all human kind.

From the notorious unnamed woman, to Simon, to us, God forgives. "Sometimes we are the agents God uses to continue this vital ministry of forgiveness to others."^v Would you rather be like Simon—righteous, judgmental, unforgiven and loveless, or be like the woman, a sinner, forgiven and full of much love?

“I tell you,” said Jesus, “her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; for this reason she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.”

Is it time for us to break out the alabaster jar and anoint someone we know? Maybe that someone is our self. Are you a person of great love? “You can be, should be, and will be a person of great love, because you *are* a much forgiven person.”^{vi} Amen.

ⁱ Verlee A. Copeland. *Feasting on the Word. Proper 67, Luke 7:36-8:3*, “Homiletical Perspective. Page 143.

ⁱⁱ Frederick Buechner, *Whistling in the Dark: A Doubter’s Dictionary*.

ⁱⁱⁱ Matthew Fleming. Sermon Themes-Luke 7:36-8:3. 06.13.2010.

http://www.goodpreacher.com/journal_read.php?id=1551.

^{iv} “What Does He Possibly See in Her?” from “I am listening...” Blog post June 8, 2010.

<http://wp.me/plgtU-3W>

^v Lauren F. Winner. Theological Themes-Luke 7:36-8:3. 06.13.2010.

http://www.goodpreacher.com/journal_read.php?id=1551.

^{vi} “Much Love.” *Homeletics Online*. 6/14/1998.

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