

Sermon for Sunday, February 23, 2025

Luke 7:36-50

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you Oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Today's Scripture reading is a story about a woman anointing Jesus' feet. There is a story of a woman anointing Jesus in all four of the gospels. It is common to take today's Scripture reading and assume that it's simply another telling of a story found in the other gospels. But there are distinct differences between today's story and the others. Because of the differences most Bible scholars have decided that today's story from Luke should be thought of as a standalone story. It is NOT another version of the stories found in the other gospels.

Here are some of the differences:

1. This story takes place, as Luke tells it, early in Jesus' ministry while all of the other anointing stories take place in the days just before Jesus' arrest.
2. Jesus' feet are anointed not his head as is reported in Matthew and Mark. (John says Mary, Lazarus' sister anoints Jesus' feet.)
3. Simon was a common name among men in Israel 2000 years ago. There are multiple people named Simon throughout the gospels. There is Simon Peter the fisherman, Simon the Zealot, Simon the leper, and Simon the Pharisee. Today's story takes place in Simon the Pharisee's home.
4. The woman in this text is unnamed. Many jump to the conclusion that this is Mary Magdalene. But there is no indication that this is true. (In one of the gospels it is said that Jesus cast 7 demons out of Mary Magdalene. This and the fact that she was known as coming from the town of Magdala is all that we know about her.)

Let's turn now to the actual Scripture text and allow it to inform our thoughts and musings. Finally, we will consider how this story applies to us and to our lives.

Hear again, the parable: "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?"

Parables were stories crafted by Jesus to teach his listeners (and us) truths about God and life in God's kingdom. Usually when we hear a parable we are encouraged to make a couple of interpretive moves. The first is to look at the characters and think about who is God, and who or what the other characters represent. The second step is to stretch the parable to apply to our personal lives. Today's parable has three characters: the creditor (the one to whom money is owed) and two debtors (the ones who owe money.)

Who do we think the creditor is? *God*. Please note that in the second sentence of the parable, the creditor cancels the debts of both debtors. From that moment the debt is in the past and no longer exists.

Who do we think are the debtors? *The unnamed woman and Simon the Pharisee*. Jesus affirms later that the woman is one. But Jesus never comes right out and says that Simon the Pharisee is the second.

The parable is two sentences long and ends with a question. It does not specify which one feels more gratitude/love... Jesus leaves the answer up to Simon and he responds, "I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt." Jesus quickly says, "You are correct." Most listeners would come to the conclusion that the woman had the greater debt. But does she really?

Let's spend a little time now thinking about the woman. To our modern eyes and ears, the actions of the woman appear most odd. She barges into a stranger's house, and then with weeping she anoints Jesus' feet. Life in Israel 2000 years ago was different. Homes were much more open and people would enter far more freely than compared to modern times. Knowing this cultural difference it's not that odd that a woman entered Simon the Pharisee's home especially if she knew that Jesus was there. But in other ways it remains odd because Simon is a Pharisee and Pharisees are concerned with religious/ritual purity. The unnamed woman is known by Simon (and possibly the larger community) as a sinner. Entering Simon's home would have brought disgrace to those inside. It's actually odd that Simon or someone from the household didn't send her away.

Let's do some supposing about this unnamed woman. Suppose that this woman had already heard Jesus speak; like the day before or last week or something. Suppose that she saw Jesus for who he truly was; she believed in him as God's Son; and that he had the authority to declare that her sins were forgiven. Suppose that he

has already told her that her sins are forgiven. Now suppose that the weight of shame and guilt has been lifted from her shoulders because of Jesus' words. She is suddenly feeling much freer than she has in a long, long time. Knowing that the burden of sin has been lifted from her she seeks him out so that she can express her gratitude, love, and joy by anointing Jesus' feet.

The description of the events in this passage makes more sense if Jesus had told the woman that she was forgiven in an earlier and undescribed scene. The woman doesn't act as she does because she is asking *for* forgiveness. She is acting as she does because she has already received it!

Why does this interpretation matter? It matters because we are like the woman. Our massive debt to God has been paid already. It has been expunged, it has been wiped away. and not by us or anything we have done. Jesus died on our behalf a long time ago and paid the debt that sin burdens us with. He did so out of love for all of us and it had utterly nothing to do with whether we had done anything to earn or deserve it. Discovering this amazing gift of love can be overwhelming. (It might send a woman to seminary!) For some this discovery is life changing. For others it might cause us to weep with relief and joy, just like the unnamed woman in today's Scripture reading. To discover that the debt has been paid, to discover that we have been released from the burden that has been weighing us down frees us.

Frees us to do what? To give thanks to God for all the benefits we have received. To tell others what it feels like to know that you are forgiven. To love and serve the Lord.

Be at peace my friends, knowing that you too are the forgiven ones of God just like that unnamed woman. Be at peace knowing that nothing can separate you from God's love. Be at peace knowing that you are the beloved of God. Amen.