



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church

Watertown, WI

“Simon’s Unexpected Guest”

Rev. David K. Groth

36 One of the Pharisees asked him to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and took his place at the table. 37 And behold, a woman of the city, who was a sinner, when she learned that he was reclining at table in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster flask of ointment, 38 and standing behind him at his feet, weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears and wiped them with the hair of her head and kissed his feet and anointed them with the ointment. 39 Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner." 40 And Jesus answering said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." And he answered, "Say it, Teacher." 41 "A certain moneylender had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. 42 When they could not pay, he cancelled the debt of both. Now which of them will love him more?" 43 Simon answered, "The one, I suppose, for whom he cancelled the larger debt." And he said to him, "You have judged rightly." 44 Then turning toward the woman he said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. 45 You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss my feet. 46 You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. 47 Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven--for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little." 48 And he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." 49 Then those who were at table with him began to say among themselves, "Who is this, who even forgives sins?" 50 And he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace." Luke 7:36-50

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost
June 16, 2013

Collect of the Day

Almighty and everlasting God, increase in us Your gifts of faith, hope, and love that we may receive the forgiveness You have promised and love what You have commanded; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

It was a formal occasion to which Jesus was invited. The custom of the day was to have low couches or cushions arranged in the shape of a U. The food was in large bowls in the middle of the U. The guests reclined, leaning on one elbow, feet away from the table. The houses were built in such a way that passersby could look in and see who was at the table. If it looked interesting, it was not unusual for people to crowd in and watch and listen.

Sandals were always left at the door. While the guests reclined and visited, servants usually poured water over their feet, drying them with a towel. The ritual was as normal and predictable as shaking hands with your guests when they arrive, and offering something to drink.

But in this case, there has been a significant and serious deviation in custom. The host, Simon the Pharisee, has not welcomed Jesus with the customary kiss. No water was poured on Jesus' feet which was the minimal gesture of hospitality. No oil is put on his head. It was a visual snub -- not unlike inviting a guest to dinner and then ignoring him. People would have noticed.

Who knows what Simon was thinking? Surely he was familiar with the customs of the day. Perhaps he hadn't made up his mind about this man Jesus, and wanted to protect his reputation by being cautious and cool with him. Perhaps he **had** made up his mind and was intentionally snubbing Jesus to express disagreement with his teaching. Whatever his motives, Simon's welcome was deliberately cold and loveless.

It's significant that Jesus accepted the invitation in the first place. And though Jesus notices he's been snubbed, he in no way makes a move to even the score. He rewards Simon's lack of hospitality, we shall see, with an earnest effort to help the man's soul.

"And behold" the text says, "a woman of the city, who was a sinner" came in. Sometimes we forget that "Behold" expresses astonishment. That's clearly how those in the house feel when this woman barges in. She's from the city; they know her or know of her, for she was "a sinner."

She may not have been a prostitute, but there are indications. "Sinner" is often a sort of code word for that line of work. So a surprise, indeed, to see this woman come into the Pharisee's house! And she has an alabaster flask or vial of perfume. Alabaster is a semi-transparent white or yellow stone. It's called "alabaster" after the town in Egypt where it was chiefly found. This bottle contains in the Greek what is called *muron*, an expensive perfume.

Standing at his feet she begins to weep. Her tears wet his feet. She lets her hair down. (For a woman to let their hair down in public was considered indecent and disgraceful.) Then she begins to dry his feet with her hair. She's making quite a spectacle of herself! The dinner guests and onlookers are stunned – uncomfortable and embarrassed for their host, Simon. No one knows what to do or say. And for his part Jesus has not made the slightest move to pull away from the woman. He just sits there while she does all this. In fact, his consent only encourages her, and she goes at it more fervently. Now she's even kissing his feet.

Then she pulls out her little alabaster flask containing that precious perfume. Someone calculated that it was worth about a year's wages for a laborer. If you had it, you used it sparingly, maybe stretching its use out over a lifetime. Toward that end, the bottles usually had a beeswax cap in which a little slit was cut to decant the perfume just one drop at a time. But in

his account, Mark tells us the woman breaks the neck of the bottle and pours it all out on Jesus' feet. It was an outrageous thing to do. In his account John noticed it filled the whole house with the strong fragrance, a fragrance which would surely linger in Simon's house for days as a constant and unwelcome commemoration of the evening.

Simon sniffs his displeasure, saying to himself, "If this fellow were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him." In Simon's view, either Jesus doesn't know the true character of the woman, in which case he lacks the discernment of a true prophet; **or** he does know and yet willingly accepts her veneration, in which case he lacks the holiness of a true prophet. Either way, Simon has made up his mind about Jesus. He's no prophet . . . maybe a pretender or a wannabe . . . and he's certainly no Messiah; on these points Simon is now well satisfied.

Realize, not a single word has been spoken since the woman entered the house. It's all very quiet, except for her subdued weeping. I suspect the other guests at the table with Simon are turning their disapproving attention more and more from the woman to Jesus. How could he allow her to carry on like this?

Jesus breaks the silence. "Simon, I have something to say to you", and what he says shows that he knows exactly who the woman is, and also what Simon is thinking. It's a little parable, just four sentences long. "A certain moneylender had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he cancelled the debt of both. Now which of them will love him more?" Simon is wary. He doesn't like where this is heading. "I suppose it's the one who had the larger debt" he says. You are correct, Jesus replies.

The parable is so simple, yet so poignant. If Simon has any brains at all he will see the woman as one of these debtors and himself as the other.

In disgust, had Simon turned away from the woman? Jesus turns toward her and tells Simon to do the same. “Do you see her?” he asks. “I came to your house as a guest and you gave me no water for my feet, but she has wet my feet with her tears” . . . “the blood of her heart” Augustine writes, and of all waters the most precious. “And instead of using a towel to dry them, she used her hair”, what is often a source of vanity and pride but she uses it in deepest humility and devotion. “You didn’t give me the customary kiss of friendship and welcome”, but she’s been showering my feet with kisses. You didn’t anoint my head with common oil, but she’s poured precious perfume out on my feet.”

Now we’ve been assuming all along that this woman was a great sinner and that Simon was not. That is, he has his faults, but not like her. But this passage isn’t really about the sum total of sin. It’s about our perception of our sin, for before God we are all poor, miserable sinners. This woman was indeed a sinner, and she knew it. She felt her transgressions weighing down on her, squeezing the life right out of her. Simon also was a sinner, but it wasn’t a big deal to him because he didn’t think it was a big deal to God. He thought his debt was small. So he’s walking through life mostly unaware of his profound need for forgiveness. That sort of ignorance is blissful in this life, but disastrous for the life to come.

You’ve heard me say this before but it bears repeating here because it’s at the very heart of the passage. If you think your sin is small and inconsequential then you’ll have a small and inconsequential Savior. If you think your debt to God is insignificant, a “chump change debt” then your love for God will also be insignificant, a “chump change love”. But the truth is, we all have these bank-breaking debts before God. There are some who feel it, every bit of it, because they know their sin, it’s always before them. Sometimes the whole community knows their sin . . . as in the case of this woman. But at least she sees in Jesus the one who frees us from sin, the one has the authority to cancel it outright. She has heard in his message the message of God’s grace and forgiveness, even for her. That’s why she’s so grateful. That’s why she

kisses his feet and pours out that precious perfume. When he forgave her debt it gave her her life back.

And notice Jesus does not come right out and judge or condemn Simon. He doesn't say, "You know, Simon, your debt is just as great as hers." If he had, Simon would have resented it and probably hardened his heart as well. Instead, with this simple parable Jesus illustrates the principle so clearly that Simon would figure it out. If you feel you don't need much forgiveness, you'll have little love for Jesus, little faith in him, little gratitude before him, little need of him, and your offerings will certainly reflect that as well. Towards Jesus you will be neither hot nor cold, just lukewarm . . . a temperature which God says he cannot tolerate. But if you've been forgiven much (and know it) your love for Jesus will also be great, and your gratitude.

When Jesus took that bone crushing weight off of the woman, she felt like she could finally breathe again. But where did he put it? What did he do with it? Paul tells us in the epistle lesson: "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us." He paid her debt and yours on the cross. Again, from the epistle, "No one is justified before God by the law" for "The righteous shall live by faith" (Gal. 3:11), faith that we are forgiven by God's grace in Jesus Christ, justified by his death and not by our works, faith that he has canceled our debt outright.

And so see yourself in this woman. She's a great sinner indeed, but hear him say to you, "Your sins are forgiven." That massive debt has been erased from the ledgers. The weight lifted. The chains loosed. "Your sins are forgiven." After all, who's the moneylender in the parable? It's Jesus, right . . . the One who cancels both the small and the massive debt. He's the banker who releases his debtors so freely that they owe not even a penny.

The guests at the table aren't sure Jesus has that authority. "Who is this who even forgives sins?" they ask, thinking only God can do that. But Jesus isn't finished

yet. Turning to the woman, he says, “Your faith has saved you. Go in peace.” Now he’s claiming also the authority judge, the divine right to say, this one has saving faith.

So hear him say to you, “Your faith has saved you”. It’s not that you have it all figured out or never have any doubts. But like the woman you do see him as the One who has the authority and love to forgive you, and with that forgiveness to save you. Gone is the sin and all its consequences: guilt, curse, penalty, judgment, death, damnation. When our sins are gone, salvation is ours. God is our friend. Therefore we have peace.

Please know that feeling of peace may fluctuate and even be absent at times, but the condition behind it does not change. Your status as one having been forgiven and redeemed by Christ does not change, even as your status as a baptized child of God does not change. The feeling of peace might ebb and flow and oscillate, but the condition for peace does not change. If it’s absent now, it will blossom again. Paul writes, “Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom. 5:1).

So hear again the voice of Jesus: “Your sins are forgiven. Your faith has saved you. Go in peace.” Amen.

[Note: Verse 47 is easily misunderstood: “. . . her sins which are many, are forgiven – for she loved much.” This does not mean her love prompted his forgiveness. It’s the other way around. Forgiveness prompts love. In the parable the debt was forgiven first, then comes the love and gratitude in response. So also here. The woman’s great demonstration of love is proof of having been forgiven much. We could say, “Clearly it has rained, for the pavement is wet outside. The puddles are visible proof that it has rained.” So also the woman’s love is visible proof that her sins have been forgiven. We might say it this way: “Her sins, which are many, are forgiven – for look at how she loves him.”]

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