

Trinity 3

Luke 7.36 - 8.3

Simon the Pharisee asks Jesus over for dinner, Jesus accepts, and the two sit down for a meal. Simon is obviously open minded enough to invite the renegade rabbi over to his house for dinner. As we find out later, he is not quite excited enough about the event to make a big show of it – to ask a servant to wash Jesus’ feet, for example – but he is willing to hear what the increasingly popular teacher has to say.

Now it was the custom in those days for a visiting rabbi to preach a sermon. So Jesus preached to the invited guests on the inside and to others who had gathered outside the wall of the house and who had come to listen. Jesus probably preached on the forgiving love of God that goes out unconditionally to all people - no matter what they have done - without earning it through good works or keeping the Law.

Simon was impressed, but not especially affected. There was, however, a woman who had been listening on the other side of the wall who was moved to tears. She ran and knelt at Jesus' feet and washed them with her tears. For a woman to unbind her hair in public was considered, in those days, the trademark of a harlot. But this woman was so touched by the words of Jesus that she lost all self-consciousness. She no longer cared what people thought of her, and she wiped her tears from his feet with her long hair. Around her neck she wore a little vial of perfume, as most Jewish women did. This was valuable and the most precious thing she owned. But she broke it open and poured it over Jesus' feet and kept kissing his feet in gratitude for the message of forgiveness that she had heard. Simon was shocked at her behaviour and that, knowing that she was such a sinful woman, Jesus had allowed this to happen.

Imagine the room. Imagine Simon, whose carefully casual dinner just became shockingly uncomfortable. Simon’s reaction – or the emotional response that we might picture him having – is not difficult to understand. If he is shocked, there is a good chance that we are too. A woman overcome with emotion for reasons that we do not know, her tears washing a man’s feet, her hair drying them, her kisses, the oil ... it all seems so raw and vulnerable, almost private something that wasn’t meant to be seen at all.

Only Jesus is able to understand this woman's extravagant gesture, her otherwise inappropriate actions, as a full-body attempt at reconciliation, a plea for forgiveness. If she is a sinner like the rest of us, only Jesus knows her sin.

Here, we get a sense of God's love, of God's composed and collected way of accepting our broken pleas, our vulnerable moments, and refusing to turn away from them. While we may find it difficult to forgive, we see that forgiveness is natural to God. While we may find ourselves cringing away from the brokenness of others, we see that God never blinks. For Simon, and maybe for us, this introduction to a God so full of love and so ready to reconcile with us can be almost too much to bear.

Do you ever wonder why Jesus was so forgiving towards the wayward and the sinners, and yet so seemingly harsh towards the upright Pharisees, pillars of the Jewish religion? Was it perhaps because Pharisees saw moral goodness as their own achievement, based on will-power and integrity, without need for divine help or forgiveness. God, they felt, was a Law-enforcer, who rewarded those who observed the Law, while punishing those who broke it. This explains their attitude towards sinners, whom they shunned and despised. They were blind to the fact that we do not, and cannot, create our own goodness.

Jesus meets Simon's gaze across the table, setting down his glass, staring for a while. In case we were wondering who is in charge here, we are about to find out. "Simon, I have something to say to you," Jesus begins, and then he tells a story. With the message:

"It is the one who is forgiven little who has little love," The ones who are good for making excuses are seldom good for anything else.

Then Jesus turns to the woman and tells her that she is forgiven. Her sins, known to him alone, 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.

Like Simon, we all might have an intellectual interest in Jesus, an interest that extends about as far as a carefully casual dinner party with Christ as the guest of honour. But we have our "alabaster jar" side, too – that part of us that yearns for reconciliation and forgiveness, that wells up with emotion when we think of the pain and the wrong that we cannot name. Here we learn that Jesus knows us better than anyone else, that he accepts our offerings no matter how awkward, how ugly, and forgives.

The Pharisees seemed to think they had no sin. Jesus called them “*hypocrites*,” which in Greek means “actors.” ... wearing masks of respectability which actually masked their artificiality, falseness, and shallowness of personality.

What they forgot was that God had given them the 10 commandments because he knew that they were programmed to break them! The Pharisees had created a system where they could present their righteousness to the world – their keeping of the letter of the Law. But in fact behind their masks of respectability they happily broke all of the rules. They had created a God in their own image, they happily assassinated the characters of the vulnerable and those on the margins, breaking those and all the other commandment in-between.

Society tells us we cannot steal, murder, or engage in other socially destructive behaviour without being punished.

Most of us conform more or less to this requirement, and we deny and repress the thief and murderer within us. The Christian moral code goes further, and tells us that we must be loving and forgiving. So to conform to that ideal, we reject the part of us that gets angry and is vindictive.

Simon, the public religious figure is disturbed that Jesus would allow this woman to touch him, let alone show such extravagant devotion. Jesus says to him that the great affection and love she shows him is because she has had so many sins forgiven. “But he who is forgiven little loves little.”

The implication is that Simon is a sinner too but he doesn’t know it. Simon’s love is reflected in his scant hospitality to Jesus. In terms of what psychologists would say, Simon has developed his moral ideals to the point of denial of his sin. He has put his trust for salvation in his ability to fulfil his moral ideals.

The woman, on the other hand, realizes that her moral works cannot save her. All she can do is throw herself on God’s mercy. And what has that done for her? It has brought a profound transformation. It has released the deep wells of love and devotion in her. The woman’s extravagance is a picture of the extravagance of God’s grace.

The reason a notorious sinner is closer to the kingdom of God than a Pharisee is not that it is morally better to be a notorious sinner. It is not—

it's almost always morally worse. But the good can drive out the best; and a notorious sinner may well be closer to God because she is less likely to hide from God and the truth behind a wall of self-righteousness and silly credentials.

Forgiveness, lies at the heart of the Christian Gospel.

Jesus told Simon a story about forgiveness and gratitude, and reminded him that the woman had done for him all the things that Simon had failed to do for him as his guest.

Jesus interpreted the woman's acts as evidence of gratitude for forgiveness already received, even as Simon's lack of appreciation was evidence of little forgiveness received. So the story does not teach that those who love much are forgiven much, but that those who are forgiven much will love much, or will show much appreciation. This is the heart of the Gospel: God comes to us on God's own initiative with free forgiveness, and when we realize this and accept it, gratitude overflows in extravagant deeds of devotion.

Be careful when you listen to the message from the Gospel because the same story can invoke opposite responses. It thrilled the woman and moved her to self-forgetful love, but it offended Simon and stirred him to self-righteous contempt. Be very careful! The Gospel can bring out the worst in us!!

Let me close with the words of Hartley Coleridge who seems understand:

SHE WHO LOVED MUCH

She sat and wept beside His feet; the weight
Of sin oppress'd her heart; for all the blame,
And the poor malice of the worldly shame,
To her was past, extinct, and out of date:
Only the sin remain'd,—the leprous state;
She would be melted by the heat of love,
By fires far fiercer than are blown to prove
And purge the silver are adulterate.

She sat and wept, and with her untress'd hair
Still wip'd the feet she was so bless'd to touch;
And He wip'd off the soiling of despair
From her sweet soul, because she lov'd so much.

I am a sinner, full of doubts and fears:
Make me a humble thing of love and tears.

This sonnet by *Hartley Coleridge* (1796 – 1849) son of Samuel T. Coleridge

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