



Luke 7:36-50
“When Forgiveness Breaks Through”

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“Following Christ from City Center”

LUKE 7:36-50, 8:1-3 "WHEN FORGIVENESS BREAKS THROUGH"

1) v.36 JESUS AT TABLE WITH PHARISEES.

Jesus Is Open To All Types, Running Conflict

36 One of the Pharisees asked him (Jesus) to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house, Open, //5:17-26
I and took his place (i.e. reclined) AT TABLE. Left Side, Symposium, Pharisee (vv. 36 [2x], 37, 39)

Contempt By Omission: No Greeting/Water/Oil, Absorbs Insult, (L)

2) vv.37-39 THE WOMAN'S ACTIONS AND SIMON'S PERSPECTIVE ON SIN.

Open Room, Listen To Learned Conversation

a) vv.37-38 The Unnamed Woman's Three Actions Towards Jesus. Sinner in the city

37 And behold, a woman who was a sinner in the city, Still In Nain? 7:34 Friend Of Such, Uninvited Guest
II when she learned that "he was at table in the Pharisee's house," News Spreads In The Town
brought an alabaster flask of perfume, Expensive Perfumed Oil (myron)

v.37a, 39d Inclusion = sinner

Is. 42:7

- 1) and standing behind his feet, weeping,
she began to wet his feet with her tears,
and wiped them with the hair of her head.

Action 1: Wash/Wipe

- 2) and kissed (repeatedly) his feet

Action 2: Kiss, Deep Emotion

- 3) and anointed them with the perfume.

Action 3: Anoint, Aroma

She Justified God, Agreed With Divine Verdict

b) v.39 Simon On Jesus The Prophet And The Sinful Woman.

SOCRATIC DIALOG

Concerns Of Ritual Purity, Contagious Woman!

39 Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, Unreal Condition In Present Time
III "If this man were a prophet, (Which he is not!) Contempt, 7:16, Question (1)

he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, Lev. 15:19-32, Innuendo!
for she is a sinner." (Which he does not!) //7:29-30, 2:35, Jn. 4:19

Spirit: Jesus Knows Woman, Mind Of Simon, Of God!

3) vv.40-43 DIALOG AND THE PARABLE OF THE TWO DEBTORS. Center

40 a And Jesus answering (his thoughts), said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." Warn
b And he answered, "What is it, Teacher?" Rabbi

c1 A certain creditor had two debtors; Story + Question, Is Jesus The Creditor?

2 one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. Substantial

2' When they could not pay,

1' he forgave (cancelled) them both.

Gracious Surprise!

c' Which of them will love him more?"

Counter-Question (2)

b' Simon answered, "The one, I suppose, to whom he forgave more." Trapped, Grudging?

a' And he said to him, "You have judged rightly."

Forced Answer From Opponent (3)

Her Great Love Shows A Great Debt Is Forgiven

2') vv.44-48 THE WOMAN'S ACTIONS AND JESUS' PERSPECTIVE ON SIN.

Overt Sinners Responded, What About Covert?

a) vv.44-46 The Woman's Three Actions Contrasted with Simon's Inaction, Insult.

44 Then turning towards when the woman he said to Simon, "Do you see this woman?" He Did Not!

V 1') I entered your house, you gave me no water for my feet, Action 1: Wash
but she wet my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. Is. 52:7, Lavish

45 2') You gave me no kiss (i.e. to a rabbi on the hand) Action 2: Kiss
but from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss my feet. Lavish

46 3') You did not anoint my head with oil, Action 3: Anoint
But she has anointed my feet with perfume. She Is Worthy, Jesus Not Reject Lavish Affection

Can He See Her Differently? vv.47-48

b) vv.47-48 Jesus the Prophet, The Sin Issue And Love As A Fruit. Prior Encounter

47 1) Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven, Jn. 20:23, Sins Of Flesh Easily Forgiven
VI 2) therefore she loved much; Love Not Earn Forgiveness, Evinces Gratitude, 1:22, 6:21

1') but he who is forgiven little, Proverb? Stab At Simon! Refutation Of Opponent (4)

2') loves little." Speaks To Them/ To Her, No Awareness Of Need For Forgiveness

48 3) And he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." 5:21, 24, 7:49 God's Prerogative = "by God through me"
Simon Was Wrong About Her/Jesus/Himself, 1 Kgs. 22:19ff.

1') vv.49-50 THOSE AT TABLE RAISE A QUESTION.

Who Do You Identify With?

49 Then those who were AT TABLE with him began to say among (in) themselves, Apart From The Temple, Chorus
VII "Who is this, who also forgives sins?" Identity? 5:21, Mk. 2:7, "Who can forgive sins but God alone?"

4:18, Answer = Jesus Functions To Heal Relationship With God

50 And he said to when the woman, Open-Ended, How Did the Silent Woman Respond Later?
"Your faith has saved (healed) you; go in peace" (shalom). 7:9, 8:28, 18:42, 17:19, Gk. sozo = saved/healed

U.M. DOCTRINE THAT ADDRESSES SIN AND FORGIVENESS (BOD 2012: 65-66)

Article VII—Of Original or Birth Sin

Original sin standeth not in the following of Adam (as the Pelagians do vainly talk), but it is the corruption of the nature of every man, that naturally is engendered of the offspring of Adam, whereby man is very far gone from original righteousness, and of his own nature inclined to evil, and that continually.

Pastor's Commentary:

"Sin is not just what I do. It is deeper, like a systemic disease. My very heart is corrupted and needs healing."

Article VIII—Of Free Will

The condition of man after the fall of Adam is such that he cannot turn and prepare himself, by his own natural strength and works, to faith, and calling upon God; wherefore we have no power to do good works, pleasant and acceptable to God, without the grace of God by Christ preventing us, that we may have a good will, and working with us, when we have that good will.

Pastor's Commentary:

"I cannot fix myself with my own resources. But God has not deserted me. He supplies grace to enable me to start the journey home. Whatever good I do before faith in Christ is marked up to God's grace not my goodness."

Article IX—Of the Justification of Man

We are accounted righteous before God only for the merit of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, by faith, and not for our own works or deservings. Wherefore, that we are justified by faith, only, is a most wholesome doctrine, and very full of comfort.

Pastor's Commentary:

"I am restored by what God does for me in Christ. God's grace enables me to trust this, and not to think that I can add anything to it."

Article X—Of Good Works

Although good works, which are the fruits of faith, and follow after justification, cannot put away our sins, and endure the severity of God's judgment; yet are they pleasing and acceptable to God in Christ, and spring out of a true and lively faith, insomuch that by them a lively faith may be as evidently known as a tree is discerned by its fruit.

Pastor's Commentary:

"Good works are a natural outgrowth of lively faith. I have a new desire to do good because of Christ. Yet, these actions do not pay for my sins, nor do they in any way put God in my debt. They are the fruit of a new root."

Article XI—Of Works of Supererogation

Voluntary works—besides, over and above God's commandments—which they call works of supererogation, cannot be taught without arrogancy and impiety. For by them men do declare that they do not only render unto God as much as they are bound to do, but that they do more for his sake than of bounden duty is required; whereas Christ saith plainly: When you have done all that is commanded you, say, We are unprofitable servants.

Pastor's Commentary:

"No matter what I do, God is never in my debt. All that we are enabled to do is by the grace of God."

Article XII—Of Sin After Justification

Not every sin willingly committed after justification is the sin against the Holy Ghost, and unpardonable. Wherefore, the grant of repentance is not to be denied to such as fall into sin after justification. After we have received the Holy Ghost, we may depart from grace given, and fall into sin, and, by the grace of God, rise again and amend our lives. And therefore they are to be condemned who say they can no more sin as long as they live here; or deny the place of forgiveness to such as truly repent.

Pastor's Commentary:

"Christians continue to sin after conversion. We return the same way we came to Christ the first time, through confession, repentance, and faith. Christian maturity trusts in Christ from beginning to end."

A Brief Treatment Of Luke 7:36-50

This thought unit serves as an example for important ideas in the previous unit (7:18-35). The unnamed woman exemplifies that Jesus is “a friend of tax collectors *and sinners*” (7:34), whereas Simon embodies the judgment of 7:30, “... but the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected the purpose of God for themselves....” Simon takes offense (7:23), while the woman is among the poor “who have good news preached to them” (7:23c). The Christological question of identity, “*Who is this*, who even forgives sins” (7:49b)? finds a later parallel in “*Who then is this* that he commands even wind and water and they obey him” (8:25)? With each new scene Luke builds a layered portrait of Jesus’ identity as God’s personal agent, the Son.

The surface structure contains seven scenes in five parts arranged in a concentric or inverted pattern (1-2ab-3-2'ab-1') with *at table* (v.36 // v.49) as the inclusion. The parable of the two debtors is set in a dialog with Simon is the center or fulcrum. Understanding Middle Eastern host-and-guest etiquette and customs is critical to story.¹ We presume the scene is preceded by Jesus’ teaching and preaching, likely in the synagogue; he is then invited home by Simon for a symposium. That Jesus “took his place at table” (i.e. reclined on a low couch with feet folded behind) without receiving the expected courtesies is the first cue something’s amiss. Jesus is snubbed by his host and absorbs it quietly. That the woman is a prostitute is disputed but likely. She is a *sinner in the city*, and Simon is shocked she is *touching* Jesus (a word full of sexual innuendo). If the alabaster flask is a tool of her trade, then its outpouring is a break with her old life. That she believes herself forgiven is also presupposed. She is grateful to Jesus for his love and hurt he’s been denied courtesies as a rabbi. In such settings the space is open to outsiders who stand around the walls and listen to the learned debates. That she heard where Jesus would be and arrived before him is signaled in two phrases, “when she learned that he was at table in the Pharisee’s house” (7:37b) and, “but from the time I came in” (7:45b). Simon’s calculated insult is quickly contrasted with her lavish devotion. First tears on dusty feet, then letting down her hair as a makeshift towel, then repeatedly kissing and anointing his feet. It was shocking, sensual, odoriferous display! Jesus said nothing and did not interrupt her outpouring of devotion. We hear Simon’s thoughts in v.39. How wrong he is, as he will soon learn as Jesus *reads his mail* and sets him up for a public fall, something a guest never did with a host in that culture. Jesus can both absorb personal shame and expose self-righteousness when necessary.

The parable is of unequal debtors, both broke, and the creditor who forgave both. The question concerns degrees of gratitude or love in response to such a gracious surprise. Simon gets the meaning but is not happy about it, “The one, *I suppose*, to whom he forgave more.” A question remains, however: Which debtor is Simon? In a personal attack in front of peers, Jesus extols the woman’s much love and Simon’s little as witnessed in the omitted courtesies. Her love is a demonstration of gratitude for much forgiveness, but little awareness of sins forgiven means little gratitude. Simon judged the woman a sinner but not himself; he judged Jesus as no prophet; he judged Jesus as teacher who needed correction. Others at table ask the right question, “Who is this, who- in God’s name- forgives sins.” Since the woman is not welcome she is blessed and dismissed. What about Simon who now stands in silent embarrassment? Does he see the grace of what’s just happened? The story is left open-ended for his and our response.

¹ Kenneth Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmanns, 1980), Chapter 1, “The Two Debtors,” 1-21.

WHEN FORGIVENESS BREAKS THROUGH

“Who is this, who even forgives sins?”

Reading the thoughts of an offended Pharisee.

LUKE 7:48

In a mid-sized southern town- it may even have been Greenwood!- a woman was caught in adultery. Her Baptist pastor visited to make an appeal and found her resistant; she cursed and told him to leave. A few days later he returned with two deacons; she laughed them off, “What I did was no big deal.” Applying the counsel of Matthew 18, her case was brought before the congregation who listened to the testimony and weighed it carefully. The consensus was she should be removed, but all would pray for her restoration.²

In the days that followed, the woman confronted several members on the street and showered them with curses. Women crossed the street to avoid her anger. During the next few years the pastor frequently saw her and spoke; she never returned the greeting. One day they met in the back aisle of the town’s largest grocery store. “There is seldom a day I do not pray for you,” he said. She began to weep.

Two weeks later she entered his study. No longer brassy and bold, she came clean and asked for guidance. They continued to meet, and one day she asked, “What must I do to reenter the fellowship of the church?” When the congregation gathered, the pastor informed them of her change of heart. Nearly a dozen members recounted unpleasant encounters with the woman. He reminded them those clashes took place prior to her request.

A vote to reclaim her lost by a substantial margin. The pastor’s face turned ashen, “Our Lord tells us that if our sister sins against us seventy times and asks for repentance, we must forgive her. You have ignored Christ’s command. I have no

² Church discipline for pastors and laity is found in *The Book of Discipline 2012* (hereafter *BOD*), Para. 2701ff. While used for clergy, charges against laity are extremely rare. Essentially, we have a two tier system in which only clergy are accountable. Is that because we are the only ones who matter? How did we get in this deplorable condition?

choice but to declare that all who voted against reinstatement are placed under discipline. Until you confess your sin, you will not receive communion. Those who voted for reinstatement will identify themselves.” At the next meeting, the woman was restored by unanimous vote,³ and the church learned something about the two sides of forgiveness, “And forgive us our trespasses, as we have forgiven those who trespass against us.” That this story sounds both quaint and bit threatening is an indicator of our laxness and how independent we’ve become of one another. We have forgotten we need each other to walk in the way of Christ, and it explains a lot of the casualties. Where the medics? Where are the field hospitals?

We are not to meddle or pry as busy-bodies, but we are pledged, as John Wesley said, *to watch over one another in love*.⁴ No one should stumble here at Main Street without someone close enough to pick them up. There can be mutual accountability only to the same level there is genuine love and real relationship. Standards with no love is petty moralism and often just plain mean, but love with no standards is nothing but sloppy, which is about where we are now. You cannot *believe and teach* anything you wish and remain a faithful member of the United Methodist Church because we have doctrinal and theological standards,⁵ and you cannot *do* anything you wish and remain a faithful member because- to the surprise of many- our also church has disciplinary moral standards for both clergy and laity.⁶

The flaming center of this faith is the great mercy of God shown in Jesus Christ, but we also have a circumference, a boundary outside which persons place themselves when they commit serious sin and refuse the grace of repentance and the healing accountability.⁷ God’s love is always *tough* love: it meets us where we are

³ Edited, W.R. White, *Stories for the Journey* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1988), 57-58.

⁴ *BOD 2012*, 76.

⁵ The five documents that compose our Doctrinal Standards are the Articles of Religion and Confession of Faith, Wesley’s Standard Sermons, his Notes on the New Testament, and the General Rules (*BOD*: 63-68).

⁶ *BOD 2012*, Para. 2702ff.

⁷ On the recovery of discipline in pastoral care, see the U.M. theologian Thomas Oden, *Corrective Love* (Saint Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1995).

but loves us too much to leave us there. God does not leave us in our sins, either in their guilt, their grip, their shame, or their power. “He breaks the power of cancelled sin, he sets the prisoner free. His blood can make the foulest clean; his blood availed *for me.*” So wrote Charles Wesley as a personal testimony a year after his fresh encounter with God’s grace.⁸ Methodist Christians believe the grace of God in every life draws us towards Christ. In other words, God is at work before we wake up. We also believe in an initial spiritual encounter- being born again of the Holy Spirit, followed by growth in holy living- what we term *sanctification*, meaning we are made both holy and happy in God by being changed over time.⁹ I am God’s personal project. So are you. Isn’t that amazing! God is orchestrating the circumstances that call us forward and supplying whatever it takes along the way. This means the racist can unlearn hatred and embrace the ones they earlier despised, the drunkard become sober, and the addicted find freedom. The adulterer can become a faithful husband or wife and the fornicator relearn the freedom of chastity and self-control; the liar can become a truth teller and the lazy a good worker. The gambler becomes a saver and the greedy a tither. The lazy TV zombie becomes a diligent student of Scripture and so grows wise and discerning. Jesus claims and changes people; he reclaims them and walks with them on a new path that leads to life. We are never done becoming more like him and thus more our true, created selves at the same time. It’s God’s grand restoration project. You have to agree to it, but you don’t control it.

⁸ *The U.M. Hymnal*, No. 57.

⁹ See the U.M Confession of Faith, Article XI- Sanctification and Christian Perfection: “We believe sanctification is the work of God's grace through the Word and the Spirit, by which those who have been born again are cleansed from sin in their thoughts, words and acts, and are enabled to live in accordance with God's will, and to strive for holiness without which no one will see the Lord.

Entire sanctification is a state of perfect love, righteousness and true holiness which every regenerate believer may obtain by being delivered from the power of sin, by loving God with all the heart, soul, mind and strength, and by loving one's neighbor as one's self. Through faith in Jesus Christ this gracious gift may be received in this life both gradually and instantaneously, and should be sought earnestly by every child of God.

We believe this experience does not deliver us from the infirmities, ignorance, and mistakes common to man, nor from the possibilities of further sin. The Christian must continue on guard against spiritual pride and seek to gain victory over every temptation to sin. He must respond wholly to the will of God so that sin will lose its power over him; and the world, the flesh, and the devil are put under his feet. Thus he rules over these enemies with watchfulness through the power of the Holy Spirit” (*BOD* 2012: 73).

The best advertisement for this faith is still a changed life. I don't ever want to stop being cleaned up and converted by the grace of God layer by layer and across all the ages of this pilgrimage till the love of Christ permeates every pore and controls every thought. If a year goes by and someone is not able to say, "Phil's a wiser and more loving man than last year," something's wrong! I've stalled and need help.

The twin crises of the United Methodist Church are that we have not attended to our doctrines or our disciplines.¹⁰ We've become vague in our believing and sloppy in our living as we've lounged around in American culture for several generations. We've been deeply influenced by a world that says, *It doesn't much matter what you believe or how you behave; all is tolerated.* Our current marketing slogan- *Open hearts, Open minds, Open doors-* may satisfy focus groups, but it has no solid content save the current reigning virtues of openness and tolerance.¹¹ Nothing distinctively Christian about it at all; it could just as easily apply to all sorts of groups looking for new members. What about something like *Jesus is still among us!* or *Come home to the world's Creator.* How about *Forgiveness Central?*

When in the third article of the Apostle's Creed we confess, "I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, *the forgiveness of sins...*" we are claiming that it is in the community called church that we experience forgiveness, the same potent medicine Jesus offered and which he died to secure. At a minimum it means some actions are *sinful*; they break fellowship with God and lead to spiritual alienation between people. Forgiveness removes blockages on our side of the relationship; God has never turned away, but our sins have severed the flow of life, and only God can remove them. The church is also given the power to withhold the grant of forgiveness when there is no repentance.¹² This is the hard side of being a pastor and the place most receive little training. People these days resent and resist moral authority, even when offered in a spirit of love and humility. We live in a morally rebellious age. Being a pastor who seeks to preach classic doctrine and

¹⁰ See William Abraham, *Waking from Doctrinal Amnesia* (Nashville, TN: Abington, 1995) for a defense of United Methodism as a confessional church.

¹¹ That it is widely used by caucus groups to promote the acceptance of non-celibate clergy as if were in fact a doctrinal statement indicates the danger of marketing slogans as a substitute for official church teaching.

¹² John 20:23.

practice loving discipline is hard, nigh on impossible these days. But it makes us a clear alternative, so that when the world gets sick of sin and its ugly consequences, there's a place with medicines to prescribe and surgeries to offer. But if the cupboard's bare because no one guarded the treasures, what can be done?

Here before us is one of the most beautiful and powerful of all gospel stories. It demonstrates how Jesus dealt with the two varieties of sinners: a *religious sinner*- Simon the Pharisee, and an *irreligious sinner*- the unnamed woman. It's a case study in the application of gracious forgiveness and gracious- if sharp- rebuke. Sins that are exposed are easily dealt with; those that are hidden require a little more work to bring to the surface. For one wound Jesus offers salve, for the other salt. It was an interesting after-church dinner party: a prostitute,¹³ a serious lay theologian, Jesus, and a few onlookers. So much is here revealed that the church decided to save this one, retell it, and finally write it down for our benefit. Thank you, Doctor Luke; yours is the only gospel in which this story is found!

Scenes Ones (v.36), Two (vv.36-38), And Three (v.39)

The Pharisees get a lot of bad press in the New Testament, but they were the best moral people of the day, serious about the laws and the traditions that had grown up around them. One of them- a man named Simon- heard Jesus speak, probably in a Sabbath synagogue service, then invited the rabbi home to continue the discussion, as was the custom. Invite the preacher home for lunch to chew on the sermon, and maybe even the preacher! Participants reclined on their left arms on couches around three sides of a low table, their feet folded behind them for the meal and discussion. To place your feet forward was considered an affront, even an obscenity. This helps us see how the woman came up behind Jesus and cried over his feet. It was common to leave the gate open for villagers to stand around the edges to hear the discussion. This explains how the unnamed woman could be present at a theological men's club. She too, no doubt, had heard Jesus preach about the Father and his kingdom of mercy, and it changed her life. The Holy Spirit pierced her heart with a desire for change. Now she would demonstrate how deep was her gratitude and how public her repentance. Whether she'd spoken to Jesus previously we do not know, but through his public teaching- or perhaps secondarily through the testimony of one who also

¹³ For an alternative identification, see Barbara Reid, O.P., "Do You See This Woman," <http://domcentral.org/preach/reidlk07>. For a contemporary parallel, see "USA: Hooker Saved On The Strip," /20/2012, Joelnews.org., No. 810.

found forgiveness, she'd had a powerful encounter with God's mercy. She was forgiven prior to our story.¹⁴ Simon's error is to see her as the same old person, when in fact she's already a new woman. Her display of love does not earn forgiveness; it's an after-effect of release and gratitude.

Note the contrast between the male host and the female intruder. Simon was curious about Jesus; she was converted. Simon heard the sermon; she entered the kingdom. Simon is interested in discussion; she offers devotion. Simon thinks he's in control; she absolutely loses control. She is praised for extravagance; Simon is exposed for his wrong judgments and self-righteousness. It's a good thing to get near Jesus by whatever means possible, but it's not safe. He will expose you, then leave you in the light of judgment and grace to make a decision. To dine in the home of a prominent Pharisee meant one entered a symbolic world of thought and ritual where the differences between clean and unclean, holy and unholy, between sinners and the righteous, was scrupulously maintained, but Jesus rewrote the map as to who was in and who out. Prostitutes who responded to Jesus found themselves now inside the kingdom circle; religious leaders who did not found themselves outside the new reality Jesus offered.¹⁵ Whether or not one trusts Jesus redraws all maps.

If you were invited to someone's home for a meal and they did not shake your hand at the door, take your coat and offer you something to drink, you'd get the message, *You are now among your betters in a hostile environment*. Such meals were preceded by important rituals, which in this case were omitted. Jesus absorbed this offense as he did all offenses later on the cross. With dirty feet he took his place. He could afford to be patient and see what the Father and the Spirit had in mind. How interesting it must have been to freely enter any situation and there trust the Spirit to show him what to say and do. When he needed information, it was there. When power was needed for healing, it was there. Jesus is always a majority.

The story presumes Simon knew the woman's reputation. They lived in the same community on different sides of the tracks. And though the story does not say

¹⁴ John J. Kilgallen, "Forgiveness of Sins (Luke 7:36-50)," *Novum Testamentum*, XL, 2, 106-116.

¹⁵ The model is a centered set (facing the center) rather than a bounded set (inside a perimeter). For how these insights might apply to the church, see Alexander Venter, *Doing Church* (Capetown, SA: Vineyard International Publishing, 2000), 50-61.

explicitly, the best guess is she was a prostitute.¹⁶ She was a woman *who was a sinner in the city*, labeled so by the guardians of morality. Simon was concerned about her *touching* Jesus in a suggestive manner.¹⁷ A flask of perfumed oil was a tool of her trade. To break it was to break with her past. The gambler throws away his cards, the lounge lizard his little black book; the pornographer closes his store; the thief returns merchandise; the gossip restores the reputations of those they slandered; the drunk pours out his whiskey; the drug dealer gives away profits to a treatment center; the abortionist now pays for the care of mommas with difficult pregnancies. I publicly quit my fraternity after I came to Christ- one of only two courageous actions I've ever carried out. I was scared to death and wept when I did it. Symbolic actions matter, and with the pouring out of the perfume she empties her old life out on the one who gave new life. God loved her and others like her. Forgiveness and new life were hers, not just for good people like the Pharisees who knew and kept the laws and traditions. Jesus is the friend of sinners, my friend, and yours!¹⁸

In his book *What Good Is God?* Philip Yancey writes about speaking at a conference on ministry to women in prostitution:

“Did you know that Jesus referred to your profession? 'I tell you the truth, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you.' He was speaking to the religious authorities of his day.... Why did he single out prostitutes?"

After several minutes of silence, a young woman from Eastern Europe spoke in broken English. ‘Everyone has someone to look down on. Not us. We are at the low. Our families, they feel shame for us.... Most places, we are breaking the law... we know how people feel about us. People call us names: whore, slut, hooker, harlot. We feel it too. We are the bottom. And sometimes when you are at the low, you cry for help. So when Jesus comes, we respond. Maybe Jesus meant that.’¹⁹

¹⁶ On the sociology and options, see Joel Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (Brand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 306-309.

¹⁷ The Greek word used here means both *to touch* and *to light a fire* with clear sexual overtones (e.g. Genesis 20:6, Proverbs 6:29, I Corinthians 7:1). Note Mt. 7:18-35 // 21:31-32 where *sinners* and *harlots* are parallel terms.

¹⁸ 7:35.

¹⁹ (New York, NY: FaithWords, 2010).

Let me pause to say something about the sex industry here in America, and on this issue Muslims are right. That we ship our filth all over the world does weaken traditional families; it is a national shame and moral crime. It's no accident that clubs and shops place their ads in the sports section because they're aimed at men. Prostitution and porn and all that goes with it defiles all who have anything to do with it. It is a serious opening for addiction, even demonization. For us men, all of whom are highly visual, the imagery is highly attractive and seductive- some call it *crack cocaine for the eyes*, but to treat women as throw-aways is to spit in the face of God who made them and us in his image. Christian homes are to be free of anything that cheapens God's good gift of sexuality. I regularly deal with those who've given themselves over to sin and bondage in this area. It is hard spiritual work to rebuild character and self-control after it's been forfeited on the devil's playground. It's not innocent; it's deadly. It's not education, it's mis-education. Just ask their wives, and their daughters who find their secret stash and then quit inviting friends over.

Three or four times in thirty years of ministry I have counseled women caught in prostitution. I kept Lori informed and quickly brought godly women in to help. All had been abused as children. They were treated like trash as young girls and spent the next years agreeing with that verdict and numbing their shame and self-hatred through drugs and alcohol. I've often wondered why the United Methodist Women, both on a local and national level, don't do more to reach out and evangelize women caught in this cycle of destruction. There are broken and hopeless women in Greenwood who need to hear about the saving love of Jesus. Who will befriend them if not Christian women? Who will risk becoming their sister and friend if not good women like the ones in this church? I don't like it any more than you do. I hear a lot of stuff I wish I didn't have to hear. God is calling his church to be a place where souls and bodies and minds and lives and families can be rescued and saved, not just a place where we have enough money to fix the cracks in the ceiling and keep the staff paid. I don't want to just be a church for *nice* people. I want to see some timid Christians become bold, some good church folk concerned about the lost. Jesus Christ transforms lives; he changed mine when I was a pitiful nineteen-year-old, and that's why I serve him and preach him as best I can. I fall down; he picks me back up. I look stupid; he never condemns me. I fail him; he never fails me. I pray for mercy and wisdom; he gives it. I owe him my life, and if I ever find a better deal I promise to let you know. He transformed the life of this unnamed woman. He will remake any who says *Yes* to him. This is what we are about, church, and- as we are about to find out- it's the religious experts and theologians like me and not the flagrant sinners that Jesus has the toughest time with.

She'd heard the report, "Jesus is to be at table in Simon's house," and gets there ahead of him. How else could he have said? "... *from the time I came in* she has not ceased to kiss my feet." Jesus takes his place, dusty feet folded behind. She sees Simon snub Jesus. Tears run down her cheeks and off her chin like a dripping faucet. She can't stop the sobs. Her tears form muddy splashes and little rivulets on his dirty feet. She has no towel and, in a moment of utter self-forgetfulness, undoes her braids and wipes away the tears and grime with her long tresses.

Electricity was in the air. For a Jewish woman to let down her hair was an erotic gesture; a wife could be divorced for letting her hair down in front of anyone other than her husband.²⁰ Does Jesus understand? What if she's been with Gentiles? Then- to top it off- she starts kissing his feet and rubbing them with perfumed oil. Jesus didn't say anything. It tickled a bit; it felt good to have his feet massaged. He just lay there propped on his left arm watching her extravagant act of love and enjoying the social anxiety it created. Tears, sobs, falling hair, the sound of kisses and the smell of the ointment. It's a highly sensual moment, a drama of gratitude acted out on the stage of Simon's courtyard. The silence of body language says it all. Repentance and gratitude mix in a fragrant offering of love. She is lost in worship.

See the scowl on Simon's face; hear him mutter. Jesus is no prophet; if he was able to see into people's minds, he'd know who this woman is who's touching him and thus defiling and rendering him ritually unclean. All this Simon thinks to himself as he watches the disgusting display. But at that very moment Jesus the prophet-through the Spirit's gift of knowledge- is preparing a trap.

Scene Four (vv.40-43)

"Simon, *I* have something to say *to you*." The silent struggle now breaks into the open. "What is it, *Rabbi*," says Simon- no doubt dripping sarcasm. Jesus then spins a web to catch his prey. He lets Simon judge himself.²¹ Everyone was listening:

"A certain finance company owner had two overdue clients, one for a six

²⁰ For an alternative to Bailey's reconstruction, see Charles Cosgrove, "A Woman's Unbound Hair In The Greco-Roman World...." *JBL* 124/4, 2005, 675-692.

²¹ On this story, see Klyne Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 77-92; Arland Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 212-217.

week’s wages, the other for eighteen months pay. He wrote them both off without reporting to the credit bureau. In an act of utter kindness, he forgave them both. The question is, Who will love him most?”

“I suppose,” said Simon grudgingly, “the one who owed most.”

“What a smart boy you are,” said Jesus, “you have judged rightly.”

Scene Five (vv.44-46)

I’ve seen it before, and I tell you it’s a hard thing to watch Jesus play hard ball and utterly expose someone in public. This is why as a pastor I am careful about the self-righteousness that so easily creeps into the attitude of religious leaders like myself. As soon as a sense of superiority creeps in, I remind myself of *who I was, who I am, and who I could again become* if God were not to protect me from the worst parts of myself by his restraining grace. Because of my office, I have to issue specific moral guidance to people, but I seek never do it from above but side-by-side. I have stood there with many, and I tell you that the ground is level at the foot of the cross. I don’t want the Lord to have to expose me to public ridicule to get my attention. Jesus was the friend of sinners; I want to be the same.

Jesus is blunt. Looking at the woman, he asks his host, “Do you *see* this woman?” That’s the problem, isn’t it? Simon did not see her as Jesus did. He saw sleaze; Jesus saw a lady on the way to new life. Simon looks through lenses of condemnation, Jesus through eyes of mercy. He loves those we write off as hopeless.

He then lowered the boom in earshot of all. In three swift comparisons he announced this woman made up for everything Simon neglected. It was Simon’s house, but she was the true host. He withheld water; she gave tears. He withheld a kiss of greeting; she kissed his feet. He did not anoint Jesus’ head; she anointed his feet. Simon the righteous Pharisee is exposed as a jerk; the woman is shown to be rightly related to Jesus through her lavish devotion. She could sing with Charles Wesley, “Jesus! the name that charms our fears, that bids our sorrows cease; ‘tis music in the sinners ears, ‘tis life, and health and peace.” She could sing with William Featherstone, “My Jesus, I love thee, I know thou art mine, for thee all the follies of sin I resign...”²² With Jesus as her touchstone, she could now distinguish between true currency and its counterfeit, between lust and love. Here was a man different from all others. What would it mean for such a woman- and we do not know

²² *The United Methodist Hymnal*, No. 171, 57, 172

her tragic history- to meet a man who was wise, loving, fully masculine, courageous enough to defend her, pure of heart and no predator? And while none of us guys are sinless like Jesus, this is the kind of man we should aspire to be, gentleman to the core, a good man under gracious restraint, tough and tender in just the right places, a man with courage to stand up for those who've been mistreated.

Scenes Six (vv.47-48) and Seven (vv.49-50)

It is then that Jesus reveals his status as a prophet and more. He knows the heart of the woman and the heart of Simon; he also knows the mind of the God the Father on the matter. Her love for Jesus does not earn forgiveness; it's rather a demonstration she's already been forgiven. It is a spiritual law you will only love Christ to the same degree you see yourself forgiven by him. If you see yourself as a pretty good person needing only minor adjustments, you won't understand why some people talk about him in ways you find embarrassing. You'll be offended by their devotion. But it's not them that has the problem; it's me and you. It's not the woman who was in danger of defiling the crowd with her sin; it was Simon! Sins of the spirit are always harder to deal with than sins of the flesh. Religious pride is harder to heal than prostitution. She sees herself in the light and turns towards it; Simon has not a clue!

Lots of conventional religious folk are offended by those who are more expressive in their devotion. But if Jesus, the most winsome, wise, merciful, exhilarating, utterly loving person who ever lived never stirs your emotions, perhaps you are not one of his people yet. It was Simon's house; Jesus embarrassed him in public, made him look like a fool in front of his peers. The unnamed woman wept in love. To come near to him is to come alive at every level of your being, including your intellect, will and feelings. Simon tried to control Jesus and failed. What makes us think we can? You cannot control Jesus or put him on some religious leash. If resurrection means anything, it means he is free and wild and able to pop in and out of lives at his choosing. He is loving, but he is not safe. He is fierce, and he will mess with you. Some of you are experiencing this as I speak.

To nail it down publicly so no one questioned where she stood with the Father, Jesus pronounced her absolution in front of all, "Your sins," *which are many* he earlier said, no minimizing or political correctness here! "are forgiven, gone as far as God is concerned. Your faith- your trust in God's kindness- has made you whole. Go in peace to a new life. Go work it out. Forgive and ask forgiveness. Go witness to your Johns. Reach other women just like yourself!"

And then, just as with Simon earlier, we hear what the others are thinking, “Who is this, who even forgives sins?” This is Jesus the Messiah, Jesus the prophet of insight, the Son of God who speaks with authority, Jesus who endures our insults and finally our murderous rage that he might show God’s mercy on all sinners through his cross and resurrection. It is love that rules the universe, a love open to any who place themselves at the feet of Jesus, not just dirty and tear-stained but now bloody and nailed to a cross. Have you kissed those feet and said thank you?

She walks away with a blessing and a challenge, but what of Simon and his friends? What happened to them? We don’t know. Jesus leaves us hanging. The ending depends on us, on what we do with the light and love he gives. Do we believe in the power of God’s mercy or the power of our own religious performance? We get to choose, but make no mistake: accepting forgiveness and giving it away means I give up trying to save myself. Only Jesus saves, and then only those humbled enough to admit their need of what only he offers. The currency of the kingdom is trust.

Conclusion

One day I want to meet this woman and hear the rest of the story. How long it took her to forgive herself and for the ugly memories to fade into forgetfulness.²³ It is possible for your former life to become as unreal as a dream? Yes it is. I want to know how many men she had to forgive as she passed them in the street and endured their glances and lewd remarks. I want to know how in the power of forgiveness she struggled to build a new life and identity apart from the degradation of being a scum magnet for losers? How many other women just like herself she was able to lead to Jesus? How did she support herself? Did she find a man to love her and to whom she could be faithful, or did she live the rest of her life as a single, chaste woman? Was she ever tempted to return for the money or the sense of power and attention it gave her? I want to thank her for having courage to go where grace drew her. She’s my sister in Christ. I want to know her name. She’s family, and there’s no telling how many women across the centuries have found hope from her transforming encounter and how many men were forced to rethink their attitudes towards women.

Thank you, Dr. Luke. I think there’s hope for Simon. How about you?

²³ On the healing of memories, see Norma Dearing, *The Healing Touch: A Guide to Healing Prayer* (Grand Rapids, Baker, n.d.), Chapter 7, “Emotion or Inner Healing,” 123-136.
