

The Overlooked Woman

^{NRS} **Luke 7:36** One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and took his place at the table.³⁷ And a woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment.³⁸ She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment.³⁹ Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him - that she is a sinner."⁴⁰ Jesus spoke up and said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." "Teacher," he replied, "Speak."⁴¹ "A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty.⁴² When they could not pay, he canceled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?"⁴³ Simon answered, "I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt." And Jesus 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 bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair.⁴⁵ You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing 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 were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little."⁴⁸ Then he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven."⁴⁹ But those who were at the 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."^{NRS} **Luke 8:1** Soon afterwards he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him,² as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out,³ and Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their resources.

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Today we will finish our look at the seventh chapter of Luke and start on the eighth chapter. After the text that we looked at last week, and before the portion we heard this morning, Jesus talks a bit about John. He heaps praise on John, calls him a great prophet, and says that John's arrival had been anticipated as the one who would prepare the way for one even greater than he.

Then Jesus begins to contrast John with that which comes after John. Jesus says there is no one greater than John – and yet the least in the kingdom of God is greater than John. Jesus talks about how people have rejected both John and himself, despite the differences between them. In the three verses before today's reading, Jesus remarks that John the Baptist had led an ascetic life. John the Baptist had come, ranting and raving, yelling at people that they needed to change their ways. John preached up a storm. He avoided alcohol and abstained from other things as well. In some ways he sounds a lot like an old-time religion brush arbor mountain preacher. Some people said that John the Baptist was demented. People thought he was possessed.

Then along came Jesus, ushering in the kingdom of God. He ate and drank – and did so with rich and poor, the righteous and sinners. Jesus says, "I come along eating and drinking and people call me a glutton and a drunk and a friend of the scum of the earth." Today's text picks up several of these themes. Jesus just can't win, for losing, it seems. Jesus makes a comment that wisdom is vindicated by the results it produces. Today's text is partially about the results that wisdom produces.

Jesus is invited to go eat at the house of a Pharisee named Simon, and he accepts. A Pharisee understood John the Baptist's approach. Religion is all about correct behavior. To be right with God, you had to be meticulous in your obedience to the law. Right behavior, strict morality, exact compliance with every detail of the law, would put you right with God. Give a tenth to God and make sure that you didn't overlook anything. Give not only a tenth of what you earned, but also a tenth of the herbs that grew in your garden. Keep your self pure and un-smudged by corruption. Bad company corrupts good morals. Be careful

about who you spend time with and who you're seen with. And so, this Pharisee invites this up and coming prophet to his house for a meal.

Immediately we run into a small translation problem. Some translations say Jesus went and sat at the table. That's what we do today and it's what we've done for hundreds of years, but it isn't what the Greek says happened. The Greek says Jesus went in and reclined. In those days, the posture for eating was reclining on your left side and eating with your right hand. That means that daVinci probably has it all wrong in his painting of The Last Supper. Now, this is no big theological deal, but if you know that people reclined to eat, then you don't picture the woman in this story crawling around under the table, try to figure out which pair of feet belong to Jesus!

The only description we have of this woman is that she's a woman in the city and a sinner. Traditionally, a lot of people have assumed that she was a prostitute. The text doesn't say that, though. It just says that she was a sinner. If the text described a man as a sinner, would we assume that he was a gigolo or a philanderer? I'm not so sure that we should make the assumption that if a woman is a sinner, then her sins are of a certain type. The other side of this coin is that we shouldn't say, "Well, if she wasn't a harlot, then she wasn't such a bad sinner," as if plying an old profession is the greatest sin, a sin of much greater magnitude than other sins.

So, the woman has come to the foot of the couch where Jesus lies eating. She stands there weeping, bathing his feet with her tears. She lets her hair down – a personal and rather private thing to do back then – and dries his feet with her hair. She kisses his feet and wipes ointment on them. The whole process is tender and moving. It's very personal, one might almost say, intimate.

Simon, the Pharisee, is offended. This sinful woman is not only present in his house, she's intruding at a meal, a traditionally men-only occasion, and she's behaving in a way that is at a minimum embarrassing – and frankly inappropriate and rather scandalous. Not only has this woman crashed the Pharisee's dinner party, but he's also been wrong about his invited guest. He thought he was inviting an up and coming prophet, but that can't be the case because a prophet would know this woman is a sinful person and wouldn't let her behave this way with his feet. The meal is turning into a disaster and Simon's reputation may be damaged in the process.

At this point Jesus got his attention and tells him a parable about a creditor and two people that owed him money. One person owed about two months wages. The other owed over a year-and-a-half's wages. Neither could pay their debt - but the creditor forgave both debts completely. Now, which one of the debtors will love him more? Simon, the Pharisee, says, "I suppose that it will be the one who had the greatest debt who will love him more. Jesus says, "That is correct!"

Then Jesus asks, "Simon, do you see this woman?" Well, of course Simon sees the woman. She's right there in plain view at the foot of the couch, making a spectacle of herself. Simon doesn't want to see the woman. He wishes that she had never polluted his house with her presence. He's been trying to look elsewhere, to look around her, to look over or through her, but yes, he sees this woman. She's an embarrassment, but he sees her.

Jesus then makes comparisons between the righteous Simon and the sinful woman. "Simon, you offered an invitation but no further hospitality – no kiss of greeting, no basin of water to wash my feet, no towel, no oil to anoint my head. This woman has washed my feet with her tears, dried them with her hair, kissed my feet, and anointed them with ointment. So let me tell you something. Her sins were many and they've been forgiven. So she has lavished love on me. But the one who is forgiven little, loves little."

If this story is to be consistent with the parable that Jesus has told, then it's important to recognize that the woman's sins weren't forgiven because she washed Jesus' feet with her tears of contrition and repentance. No, her sins were already forgiven and her tears were tears of thanksgiving and gratitude. The whole foot washing and anointing with ointment is an act of love in response to having been forgiven, not an act of repentance seeking to deserve forgiveness.

The Pharisee would expect to have to do works of exact obedience in order to be in good standing with God. You obey. You comply. You behave in such a way that you deserve God's blessing and forgiveness. You learn the rules and obey them. You wear the right clothes, say the right words, do the correct actions --- and you avoid people who don't do those things. If you make a mistake you offer the right

prayers and make the prescribed sacrifices. In this way, you lead a righteous life. Do what is expected and God will take care of you.

Meanwhile this woman has been forgiven for we know not what. All we can reliably say is that her sins have been frequent enough and public enough so that it seems to be common knowledge that she isn't a nice person. She knows that and she knows that she's forgiven and she's grateful as all get out, and she's so filled with love that she stands there with no pride or sense of decorum, crying her eyes out and wiping the tears away with her hair, and kissing Jesus' feet.

Look at the difference between two religious leaders in this passage. Both are in the presence of a sinful woman. The Pharisee has an understanding of righteousness that causes him to distance himself from the woman. But Jesus understands that righteousness calls him to move closer to her with forgiveness and love. The Pharisee wants only the pure and righteous at his table; Jesus welcomes the outcast, the unclean, and the sinful to the table. "For Simon, the righteousness of God means that God cannot endure sinners, and a follower of God gains salvation by upholding the purity code, with its separation of the elect from the sinners of the world. Jesus counters Simon's misunderstanding of the divine righteousness. Shockingly, the righteousness of God is the generous mercy of God,"¹ as shown by the creditor in the parable who forgives debts for no reason.

How about the contrast between the upright Pharisee and the sinful woman? He is the one who has dedicated himself to obeying the rules, while she has been violating them. But he has offered minimal hospitality while she has given lavish hospitality. He has offered a meal; she is pouring out love on Jesus.

Jesus tells her to go in peace. Where might that be? Her way of life has caused her to be driven from the religious resources that might help restore her. "The one place she is welcome is the street, among people like herself. What she needs is a community of forgiven and forgiving sinners. The story screams the need for a church . . . that says, 'You are welcome here.'"² Wisdom, Jesus said, is known by her children. This child of the kingdom of God is no longer ostracized, shut out to live with her kind outside the boundary of the faith community. Now she has been freely forgiven, is inside the kingdom, living with gratitude and love, giving love freely to others.

So which one are we? Are we like Jesus, or the woman, or Simon, the Pharisee? Are we welcoming like Jesus, reaching out in forgiveness and love? Are we like the woman, painfully aware of our faults and mistakes, but pouring out love on others in gratitude for God's generous mercy? Or, are we kind of like the Pharisee, wrapped up in making sure that we follow the rules so that we can get the results we desire?

Finally, how would we answer the question that Jesus asked? Do you see this woman? At one level, the question is about seeing women in general. Luke is good about telling us about the women who were disciples. He makes a point of telling about a group of women who traveled with Jesus and the other disciples and who provided for the group out of their own resources. In a patriarchal society, the place of women among the disciples of Jesus was a radical thing. It's a disgrace on our claim to be a Christian society that for hundreds of years we have ignored that and women in the church had less value, respect, and responsibility in the church than they did in the band of followers who traveled with Christ. And it continues to be a disgrace in our nation that women earn an average of 80% of what men do for the same work. Do you see the woman?

On another level, do you see the one who is less valued in society? Do you see the fellow who empties the garbage can? Do you see the waitress? Do you see the clerk behind the counter? Do you see the hotel maid, or the cook, or the day laborer cleaning the yard?

Finally, do you see the rejected sinner? Do you see the prostitute? Do you see the homeless bum? Do you see the prisoner locked away for years? Do you see the dope addict, the alcoholic, the pot smoker, the pain pill addict, the dropout, and the abandoned? Simon, do you see this woman? Amen.

¹ Gregory Anderson Love, *Feasting on the Word, Year C Vol 3* (Louisville, WJK, 2010) p 144

² Fred B. Craddock, *Luke* (Louisville, John Knox, 1990) p 106