

Sermon on Luke 7:36-8:3
Fourth Sunday after Pentecost, June 12, 2016
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
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A “Sinful Woman” Forgiven?

I don't know about your bible, but my bible give titles to the passages you read, in order to help you know what the story is about. Sometimes I find the title helpful, other times I don't think they get it quite right. For example, is the story in Luke 15 “The Lost Son”, or “The Welcoming Father”? Either title works, but is that story more about the “prodigal” son's wasteful living, or about his father, who welcomes him home lavishly? Where's the focus? Some think it's on the wayward son, who came to himself and found himself forgiven and welcomed home. Others think that the focus is on the father, and his limitless compassion for his son – no matter what – beyond reason. Or actually, it's on the father as a symbol for the limitless compassion of God, for each of us. So, either focus can be useful, - and both titles work: prodigal son or welcoming father. That's the beauty of the gospel: it can be read from multiple perspectives!

So my Bible titles today's gospel passage: *A Sinful Woman is Forgiven*. I think that is a workable title to jog our memories about which story this is. A woman of the city who was a sinner washed Jesus' feet with ointment and her tears at a Pharisee's dinner party, and in the end, Jesus said, “*Your faith has saved you; go in peace.*” So the title works, and summarizes what the story is about. But I think there's a lot more going on in this story than this, so I have another title to suggest. How about this: *Woman crashes dinner party with her hair, perfume, and tears; and Jesus schools clueless men*. Do you like that better? Let me tell you what I mean.

This story of Jesus' feet being anointed by a woman is told in each of the gospels. In John's gospel, it takes place in the home of Lazarus, whom Jesus had just raised from the dead, six days before Passover, one day before Jesus entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. Lazarus's sister Mary does the anointing, with expensive perfume, like she is anointing Jesus for burial. Only Judas objects, saying the cost could have been better spent on the poor.

In the other gospels, Matthew and Mark, it is also just before Passover, when Jesus is dining at the home of Simon the Leper (a different Simon). An unnamed woman came with a costly jar of ointment (imported nard from India), and poured it on Jesus' head. The other dinner guests were angry at this waste of expensive perfume, worth 300 denarii, which could have been given to the poor. Some of these angry men were Jesus' disciples. But Jesus told them to leave her alone, that

she had done a good thing – they could show kindness to the poor every day (and should!), but she had done what she could, anointing him for burial. And Jesus said, “*Wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.*”

Luke places this story in a different context, closer to the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, in the midst of his first travels in the towns and villages of Galilee. He was preaching good news to the poor, healing the sick, giving sight to the blind, casting out demons, and stopping to eat with tax collectors and sinners in the homes of Pharisees (and criticized by some for his healthy appetite)! On this day he went to another Pharisee’s house to eat, whose name also was Simon (a very common name). He was still in the hill town of Nain, where last week we heard how Jesus raised a dead man to life in the midst of his own funeral! The men gathered at the table, looking forward to a conversation with Jesus. As dinner began, “a woman in the city, who was a sinner” entered the room with an expensive jar of ointment, and bathed Jesus’ feet with it and her tears, kissed his feet, and dried them with her hair. It was both a shocking and an awkward moment for Jesus’ male companions – both his disciples and for Simon’s other guests. Who was this woman, who interrupted the “men talk” about politics, religion, and perhaps, sports? Luke doesn’t tell us much – except that she was from the city, and was a sinner. This only means that she was not a farmer from Galilee or one of those who had followed Jesus from Capernaum. She must have heard about Jesus’ and his preaching and healing powers, AND how Jesus noticed suffering people (like the widow whose son Jesus had raised back to life), and truly cared about them. He even forgave people who were known to be sinners, and did not condemn them! Perhaps this is why she had come. All we can do is speculate – which is hard to do without gossip, so let’s not!

For whatever reason, the woman’s actions would have been scandalous. She had barged into a home uninvited, where men were gathered for dinner without women present except to serve the food. She touched a man who was not her husband or a relative. She kissed his feet, and untied her hair to dry them. It just made them all so.....uncomfortable! But Jesus said nothing to her, yet. Simon the Pharisee said to himself (but not to Jesus), that if Jesus really were a prophet, he would know what kind of a woman this was, who was touching him – a *sinner*. Wink, wink, nod, nod. They all had their ideas about who she was, and why.

So Jesus told a story to Simon, about two debtors – one who owed his creditor 500 denarii, and the other who owed him 50. The creditor forgave both their debts. “So, Simon, who would be most grateful and love their creditor more?” “I guess the one who owed the greater debt,” Simon said. “Correct,” Jesus said.

Then Jesus said, “*Do you see this woman?*” Uh, yeah! “She has come into your house, where you didn’t even wash my feet with water, and she has washed my feet with tears and dried them with her hair...Therefore, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven.” And Jesus said to the woman, “*Your sins are forgiven...Your faith has saved you. Go in peace.*” (How would THAT be for a sermon title?!)

So I love how this story ends, with the beginning of the next chapter, when Jesus left the town for more villages to visit, proclaiming the good news of God. Who walked with him? The twelve (the men whom Jesus had called) – and also women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary Magdalene (who had seven demons cast out), Joanna (the wife of King Herod’s own steward), and Susanna, and many others, who all helped provide funds for Jesus’ ministry. These women whom Jesus “saved” became his traveling stewardship committee!

You see, Jesus recognized something in this unnamed woman that no one else did – because they didn’t really notice her, or see anything beyond her actions. Jesus recognized this woman’s faith - she knew whose feet to anoint, who to thank (Jesus!), and why – because she recognized the compassionate love flowing out of him to others. Jesus saw the faith in this woman that no one else could see: her genuine love and gratitude, her sorrow and regret for the life situation that she was in. For she was a “sinner” – whether it was her “fault” or not, the men probably all blamed “that woman” – where have we heard those words before?

What did the other men at the dinner party see, when they “saw” this woman? Did they really *see* her? Or did they just see the “disruption” and feel their own awkwardness? Jesus asked: “*Do you see this woman?*” and the room went silent. He told them what she had done – it was much more an expression of repentance and love than they had ever considered themselves. She put them to shame.

It’s a question Jesus could ask us today – in church, in our homes, our workplaces, and out in our communities: *Do you see this woman? Do you see these women?* Do you see ANY women? Of course, we see how women are portrayed in the media or on film, and how they are talked about – whether they are a waitress in a restaurant, in the military, a pastor, or running for President of the United States. Too often it’s “that woman” – who is overlooked or disdained.

About 50 years ago there was a television commercial that went “*You’ve come a long way baby, to get where you got to today!*” I think the commercial was about cigarettes – *Virginia Slims*. But I think they wanted to say that now women could vote, work as a professional, and do just about anything – including smoke their own cigarette in public! But how much have things *really* changed?

Today too many women and girls are victims and survivors of sexual assault, beaten, forcefully caught up in prostitution as teens, or raped in dorms, and then blamed for their own assaults. This past week we have witnessed yet another

example, in the young white male college student from Stanford who was given such a light sentence after his brutal sexual assault – his rape – of a young woman at a party. He had violated her behind a dumpster, and had run away. The judge gave him a lenient sentence of six months in jail, because he was a swimmer, with no criminal record. The story has gone viral on social media as yet another example of white privilege and men overlooking the crime of rape.

So what does this have to do with the gospel? Well, why did the woman who washed Jesus' feet with her hair make the men so angry and uncomfortable? Why did they call her a sinner? And why did King David "get off" so easy when he raped Uriah's wife, Bathsheba – and it was the child who died as the consequence? Why didn't King David have to resign in shame? All he had to do was confess his sin, and Nathan the prophet forgave him. (I wonder who wrote the words to *this* story in the Bible? Would another author have a different take on the story of David and Bathsheba?) What would her mother say? Or her dad?.....

I don't know where to go with these troubling stories of sin, repentance and forgiveness, except to call them to your attention. In each story there is sin: the sin of King David in taking another man's wife into his bed, and whatever sins the woman who washed Jesus' feet had committed. Both King David and the woman felt shame, and repented. Both were graciously forgiven. But we also see the double standard – the consequences for Bathsheba and the forgiveness of David were very different. It all seems so grossly unfair. And we see it continue to happen today, whether it's on a college campus at a party, at home or at work, in Church or in the community at large. The lack of fairness and equity in treating males versus females, or white people versus persons of color, all must be recognized – not overlooked – if we ever wish to reconcile and be healed .

As Jesus said, "*Do you see this woman?*" Jesus calls us to open our eyes and see both the injustices that happen far too often, because of gender, race, or class, and to see the faith and genuine repentance in those whom we seldom notice. Do you see this? Are your eyes and ears open? Do we in the church notice our own hypocrisies and the ways in which we fail to notice the faith in women and laypersons in general, and our double standards for clergy, male or female? Can you and I see our own blindness, and our own lack of gratitude for God's grace?

Fortunately, happily, there is good news today as well – seen in the mercy and compassion Jesus had for the woman who lovingly washed his feet with her tears. We hear Jesus' words: "*Do you see this woman?*" as a needed challenge to the Church and to the world. We hear Jesus say to her, "*Your sins are forgiven*" and testify that these words of our Lord are for each one of you and me to hear! We also hear him say to her, and to us, "*Your faith has saved you; go in peace!*" Jesus saw her, Jesus sees you, and sees in every person a beloved child of God.

So in the words of the Psalm, *Happy are they whose transgressions are forgiven, and whose sin is put away. Be glad, you righteous, and rejoice in the Lord; and shout for joy, all who are true of heart.*”

For your faith has saved you. Go in peace. Thanks be to God! Amen.