

Luke 7:36-8:3

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. 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. 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. 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."

Jesus spoke up and said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." "Teacher," he replied, "Speak." "A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he canceled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?" Simon answered, "I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt." And Jesus said to him, "You have judged rightly." 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. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. 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." Then he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?" And he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

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, as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their resources.

Psalm 32

Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.

Happy are those to whom the LORD imputes no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit.

While I kept silence, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long.

For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. Selah

Then I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not hide my iniquity; I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD," and you forgave the guilt of my sin. Selah

Therefore let all who are faithful offer prayer to you; at a time of distress, the rush of mighty waters shall not reach them.

You are a hiding place for me; you preserve me from trouble; you surround me with glad cries of deliverance. Selah

I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you.

Do not be like a horse or a mule, without understanding, whose temper must be curbed with bit and bridle, else it will not stay near you.

Many are the torments of the wicked, but steadfast love surrounds those who trust in the LORD.

Be glad in the LORD and rejoice, O righteous, and shout for joy, all you upright in heart.

Our Gospel reading this morning follows immediately after the one from last week. One of the Pharisees whom Jesus has been talking with, a man named Simon, invites Jesus to come to dinner, and he goes. He takes his place at the dinner table, and, I'm sure, begins to talk with his host and the other guests.

Now, for this story to make physical sense, you have to understand that wealthy Jews had adopted Roman dining customs. It was the fashion. "Everyone's doing it, you know."

So picture the scene...

Everyone has taken their sandals off when they come indoors. After all, the streets are dirt, littered with animal droppings and who knows what else.

The dining tables are not waist-high, or anywhere near it. If we saw them, we would mistake them for low coffee tables. The diners aren't sitting on chairs. They are reclining on cushions, with their bare feet behind them, away from the table. Three rectangular tables are set up in a U shape, with the guests on the outside of the U. The host is at the center of the center table, and the guest of honor right next to the host. The places to left and right go further down in honor, the further you go away from the

host. The open space in the middle of the U allows for everyone to be part of the conversation.

Jesus is lounging next to his host. These tables are set up in the large front room of the house, and the front door is open, facing into the U. This is so that everyone out in the street can see the kind of important guests Simon has to dinner, the rich feast he serves them, and how rich and important Simon is.

That's the scene when a woman who is a notorious sinner sees Jesus.

We don't know who she was.

We don't know what her sins were. Some people make the mental leap from a woman sinning directly to prostitution, but we do not know. We have no Biblical reason to believe that her sins were sexual in nature or any different from the sins of the men at the table.

We do know that she is probably not a guest invited to this banquet. She is not evidentially the kind of person whom Simon would publicly associate with, much less invite into his home. She is probably a gatecrasher, walking in off the street.

She sees Jesus, and she does not walk into the center of the U of tables. She walks to his feet, out on the outside of the gathering. She starts crying, and kissing his feet, and anointing his feet with ointment she's brought with her. She wipes his feet with her hair. Her devotion to Jesus is extreme, even embarrassing to witness.

Simon, Jesus' host, looks at this, and at Jesus allowing it to happen, and he says to himself, "[Now,] If this man were a prophet, he would ... know... what kind of woman this is who is touching him—that she is a sinner."

Simon has judged the woman unworthy. Unworthy of respect, unworthy of social interaction, unworthy of looking on her as a fellow child of God. Based on that judgment, he judges Jesus unworthy. He decides that Jesus must not really a prophet, or he would see what he sees, and he would kick this woman away.

Jesus does see what Simon sees. He sees all that Simon sees, and far more. He asks Simon, "Who do you think would be more grateful, a debtor who is forgiven a debt of five hundred denarii, or one who is forgiven a debt of fifty?"

Simon says that he supposes it would be the one who was forgiven the larger debt. He supposes – he has difficulty imagining being in this situation himself.

The woman who is kneeling at Jesus' feet has apparently been forgiven much. Which explains why she is so devoted to Jesus – she is overcome with gratitude.

Simon is an interesting character here. He has, as Jesus points out, not really performed the duties of a good host. He clearly wants to be seen talking with the new rabbi who was all the rage, but he is no disciple of Jesus.

He judges the woman as being beneath him. He has decided that he does not have to listen to her. He does not have to pay attention to her. He does not have to treat her as a fellow child of God, because he is so much better than she is, or so he thinks. He is convinced that he does not need forgiveness as much as she does, so he does not ask for forgiveness.

The problem with looking at Simon in this story is that there is a “gotcha” in there for us, the readers. We listen to Simon’s actions described, and we think to ourselves how bad he is and how we do better than he does, don’t we?

What do you know? We aren’t just looking at Simon. We have become Simon, with his tendency intact to point out the splinter in his neighbor’s eye while the log remains in his own.

Let’s look at Jesus instead. That’s usually more instructive. Jesus tells the woman that her sins are forgiven, and that she should go in peace.

He tells her that her sins are forgiven, and that she should go in peace.

This woman is a sinner.

Guess what? So is Simon. So are his Pharisee friends, the other guests at the dinner party. And they are guilty of the kind of sins that tended to make Jesus angry: arrogance and self-righteousness.

Jesus does not tell them to go in peace.

Guess what? I, too, am a sinner. I have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. I cannot claim ignorance of the law. I know that I have sinned.

And guess what? So are you. Your sins may not be the same as mine, but you, too, have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. This is why we confess our sins every Sunday. This is why the liturgist tells us every week that our sins are forgiven.

There is no such thing as peace without forgiveness. Jesus knows that Simon and his friends cannot have peace, because they do not have forgiveness. They will not acknowledge their own sins against God and their neighbor, so they cannot ask God or their neighbors for forgiveness.

That means that they are forever trying to justify what cannot be justified. They are stuck on the outs with God, with their pride preventing them from reconciling.

If we want to experience the peace of God, the peace that God truly wants for us, we must confess our sins and ask for forgiveness. But there's something more required, and it's usually harder. Jesus said elsewhere in the Gospel that God will not forgive those who do not forgive their brothers and sisters from their heart.<sup>1</sup>

We cannot have peace with our sisters and brothers without forgiveness.

All of us are sinners. All of us mess up. Without forgiveness, all our relationships become about nothing but bad things that happened in the past. They get stuck in the mire that is old anger and old grudges. "He said this, and I said that, and she said the other thing." There is no future in a relationship that has no room for forgiveness.

Forgiveness does not magically make everything just like it was before. Forgiveness does not mean that you set yourself up to be hurt again. But it means that

---

<sup>1</sup> Matt. 18:30-35. This is why the Lord's Prayer says "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors."

you are free to start again, to have a new beginning with that person. Things do not have to go the bad way that they went.

The relationship between the two of you ceases to be about what happened in the past, and your relationship can be about the future. That is an amazing freedom that you choose for yourself and the person whom you forgive.

I am not saying that forgiveness is easy. The Mahatma Ghandi said that forgiveness is the domain not of the weak, but of the strong. I am saying that forgiveness is worth it, and that God models it for us.

God forgives you. Whatever you have done and confessed to God, God forgives you. That means that the relationship between you and God ceases to be about bad things that happened in the past, and your relationship can be about the future.

If you are honest with yourself, you will realize that that is amazing. The devotion that the woman showed to Jesus in our Gospel story this morning was not out of line or unreasonable.

Not one of us deserves forgiveness – that's the point of forgiveness, that it is undeserved, unearned. But God gives it to us anyway.

Who is a person in your life who has done wrong? Whatever they have done, remember that you, too, have sinned and been forgiven. Whatever they have done, to you or to others, each of us must always remember that we are not, ourselves,

blameless. Comparing relative fault is pointless, because not one of us understands all the circumstances around what another person said and did.

If we view ourselves rightly, then we are in a place where we can truly forgive them anyway. And then we can have peace.

If we want peace in our lives and in the world, then we must confess our sins to God and be forgiven.

If we want peace in our lives and in the world, then our words to our sisters and brothers must be the words of Christ: "Your sins are forgiven. Go in peace."

AMEN.