

Winfield
June 12, 2016
Luke 7:36-8:3
"Grace and Love"

One of the problems with our reading today, at least to my mind, is one of the greatest problems of having divided up the Bible into chapters and verses. While it certainly does make it easier find things, it also breaks apart stories, leaving us without earlier or later contexts that are often necessary parts of the whole story.

One of the pieces missing from today's selection is Luke 7:30 that gives us Luke's perspective on the Pharisees- such as our host for the dinner in today's reading.

Earlier in chapter 7 Jesus had been talking about John the Baptist and the people's response to what Jesus had said. Verse 30 says, "[However, the Pharisees and the experts in religious law rejected God's purpose for themselves, because they had not been baptized by John.](#)" This lets us know that Luke believes the Pharisees do not feel themselves to be sinners and in need of God's grace or forgiveness. They judge themselves to be superior to other people, and there-in lies their greatest problem. This is important information for us to know for today's scripture.

So here we are at the Pharisee Simon's house where he has invited Jesus, and others, to dine. This would not have been a private dinner party, such as we are used to today where the guests would have been inside the house sitting around a table. Here, the guests would have been outside, reclining in the courtyard of the house with their left arms on pillows and eating with their right hands from food laid out on a mat before them with their lower legs and feet away from the mat.

There would have been townspeople who had not been invited crowding around Simon's courtyard, probably both inside and outside the wall, to watch such an occasion, and perhaps envy how the other 2% lived. Therefore, it would not have been unusual for someone like the "sinful woman" in Luke's account to have been there, in close proximity to the diners.¹ So, it is not like she had burst into Simon's home and thrown herself at Jesus's feet. She would have easily been able to approach Jesus' feet which would have been sticking out behind him to anoint them. However, doing so would have violated some of the customs of the day.

First, touching or caressing a man's feet would have had sexual overtones, as in the story of Ruth and Boaz at the threshing floor. The same holds true for letting her hair down in public, something a woman of that time would not do. Also, if the woman was a known sinner, as Luke tells us she is, then just touching Jesus would have made him unclean as well. So the woman has really made quite a scene there at Simon's banquet and he is scandalized.² Jesus, not so much.

Simon, knowing that the woman is a sinner believes that Jesus must not be much of a prophet or he would realize all this and respond in the same way as the righteous Simon would have expected and kept her from touching him. Therefore, he must not be a prophet. So, knowing Simon's thoughts on the situation, including his judgment of both himself and the woman, Jesus takes advantage of what he

¹ New Interpreters Bible, Vol. IX, pp 169-170

² Ibid, 170

hopes will be a teachable moment. He decides to reframe the scene and put it, and the cast of characters, in a new context.

He poses to Simon the question of the creditors: “A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed him five hundred silver coins, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he canceled the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?”

Simon answered, “I suppose the one who had the bigger debt canceled.” Jesus said to him, “You have judged rightly.”

To be fair, it wasn't much of a riddle. Any one of us could have probably answered it correctly, but the answer was not the point- the new context was. Here Jesus has presented the concept of love and forgiveness, something that Simon, who considers himself righteous under the law and not in need of, would have no concept of. Simon has walked blindly into Jesus' trap and Jesus now springs it. He equates Simon's disdain for the woman with the disdain Simon showed to Jesus as a host.

He said to Simon, “Do you see this woman? I entered your house. You gave me no water for my feet, but she has wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You gave me no kiss of greeting, but from the time I entered she has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with perfumed oil.”

Slap. Simon has now been humbled and embarrassed before all those present in his home, both those invited and those observing. While none of the actions that Simon omitted was required, foot washing, a kiss of greeting or anointing a guest's head with oil were common acts of gracious hospitality, which in this case had been withheld. Simon, the righteous, could not be bothered to offer up such hospitality to this itinerant teacher. It showed a lack of respect and love.

However, the sinful woman who has thrust herself into scene has given Jesus all these signs of respect and love. Like the greater debtor in Jesus' parable, this known sinner has shown great love to the one who preached grace and forgiveness. And she did it without expectation of reward. She just had decided to show great love for Jesus, presumably because of his teachings and the hope that they offered her. Hope that she would not have had before, under Jewish law.

Jesus tells Simon, and his guests, “Therefore I tell you, her sins, which were many, are forgiven, thus she loved much; but the one who is forgiven little loves little.” Then Jesus said to her, “Your sins are forgiven.”

Simon must have been dumbfounded. He has been publicly shown up as a poor host and upstaged by this lowly, sinful woman. Jesus had chosen her, a known sinner, over him, a righteous Pharisee. How could this be? It was just as Jesus had said, being one who considered himself righteous, he had no need to think about grace or forgiveness, or seemingly even courtesy or hospitality. He offered little because he loved little. He believed himself to be self-sufficient, while the woman, who knew herself to be in need of grace and forgiveness loved the son of God publicly and extravagantly, without expectation of reward. Something that probably would have never occurred to Simon.

Simon wanted the honor of having a person of repute, such as Jesus, in his home to increase his standing in the community, but he didn't choose to honor Jesus. It was all about Simon. But for the

woman, it was all about Jesus. And because of her love and humility the woman was publicly forgiven, which created another stir!

Those gathered at the table wondered [“Who is this person that even forgives sins?”](#) That was something only God could do. No prophet or teacher ever forgave sins. How could Jesus even offer such a thing?

How was it that the “good,” and rich and comparatively powerful people at the table, could be so clueless about Jesus and his ministry- while the lowly, sinful woman understood it and responded accordingly? Perhaps it was as Jesus said in the book of Mark, [“Those who are healthy don’t need a physician, but those who are sick do. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.”](#) (Mark 2:17)

Those who did not think themselves to be in need of a physician would not be looking for one, and would not think that one being in their midst was at all remarkable; while those who knew themselves to be sick would rejoice at the presence of a physician who could ease their suffering. The woman who was looking for the great physician sought and found him, and loved him for what his presence meant to her, and those like her. She responded accordingly with love and gratitude, even though he had not yet done anything for her but offer hope.

Hope is a wondrous and powerful thing, as Paul told us, and the Romans, a couple of weeks ago, [“Trouble produces endurance, endurance produces character and character produces hope. This hope doesn’t put us to shame, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts, through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.”](#)

This woman lived out the words that Paul wrote, even before he wrote them! The sinful woman was in trouble, and knew it. She endured the judgment and mockery of the townspeople until Jesus, the great physician showed up to heal her. She showed herself, through her actions, to be of greater character than Simon the Pharisee because the love of God had been poured out in her heart through the Holy Spirit- and acted accordingly.

Because of her hope and character she was able to respond as a loved, forgiven child of God before she even was, at least publicly. She had hope and that hope was not put to shame as Simon, who thought himself to not be in need of forgiveness, was shamed publicly. He loved little and so was forgiven little. The woman loved much, and so was forgiven much, just because she knew herself to be in need of forgiveness and sought it out.

The physician God had sent to sinners had been recognized and acted in kind. He healed one of those who he had been sent to heal. That is one of the advantages we sinners have over the self-righteous. We know that we are in no position to judge anyone else; so we are able to act humbly with others and especially before God. We are able to humbly ask for, and accept, God’s grace and forgiveness, and therefore also offer forgiveness to others. Love and appreciation is the natural response of the forgiven, but the capacity to love is often directly related to the ability to accept and receive grace, forgiveness and love.

Simon’s problem was not his conduct, but his attitude and self-awareness. Because Simon believed himself to be pious and righteous, he had no awareness of his own need for forgiveness or the ability to appreciate the one who offered it. He did not love because he had not experienced God’s love and forgiveness. Therefore he was much farther away from God than the sinful woman was. He had

excluded himself from God's grace, even though it was available to him. He didn't think he needed it and so rejected it.³ On the other hand, the woman, knowing herself to be a sinner, was able to understand what it meant to have hope of receiving forgiveness. And that hope lead to gratitude and love.

The gratitude of the forgiven is the source of new life, which is what salvation is all about. Isn't it? New life in Christ, such as this sinful woman received. If we are humble and open to God's forgiveness our life's can be changed and made new.

It is ironic that Jesus' willingness to forgive the humble and sinful was perhaps the greatest indication that he was far greater than any prophet or priest; but it was also what kept him from being recognized by those who didn't feel that they needed God's grace and forgiveness.

How often is it that the judgmental and self-righteous stand in the need of God's grace and love, and never have any clue of their need? In the end, their judgment of others becomes the judgment that they themselves receive. The haughty get brought down, while the humble get brought up.

Thanks be to God who confounds our judgement and graciously forgives us when we realize our need and become willing to humbly ask for it. We are forgiven our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.

How ironic! And how wonderful. Thanks be to God!

³ Ibid, 173