

LOVE AND FORGIVENESS

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We're going to read in unison Luke 7:36-50. "One of the Pharisees asked him to eat with him and he went onto the Pharisee's house and sat at the table. Behold a woman of the city, who was a sinner, when she learned that he was sitting at the table in the Pharisee's house brought an alabaster flask of ointment standing behind him at his feet weeping she began to wet his feet with her tears and wipe them with the hair of her head and kissed his feet and anointed them with the ointment. 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 sort of woman this is that is touching him. For she is a sinner.' Jesus answering, said to him, 'Simon, I have something to say to you.' He answered, 'What is it teacher?' 'A certain creditor had two debtors. One owed five hundred denari and the other fifty. When they could not pay he forgave them both. Now which of them will love him more?' Simon answered, 'The one, I suppose, to whom he forgave more.' He 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 wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You gave me no kiss. But from the time I came in, she has not ceased to kiss 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 are many are forgiven for she loved much. He who is forgiven little loves little.' And he said to her, 'Your sins are forgiven.' Those who sat at table with him began to say among themselves, 'Who is this who even forgives sin?' And he said to the woman, 'Your faith has saved you. Go in peace.'"

There are three persons in this story. A Pharisee by the name of Simon. Simon is a rather frequent name found of various characters in the New Testament. An unnamed woman of the city. And Jesus himself.

The scene is the Pharisee's house. In biblical days the setting for a meal would have been much different than now. If you invited a special guest you would bring them to the most revered spot in your house to eat. Dining room if you had a dining room. Your best china or your best melemac. Whatever you might have you would set them down. And of course they would take out a chair and their feet would be on the ground and their posterior would be resting on the chair and their back straight up. In biblical days however they reclined while they ate. Evidently we are told that when a significant dinner was thrown in honor of a visiting teacher or guest it would be the custom to hold the dinner in the open area of the courtyard. With the walls of the house surrounding that open courtyard. If it were a distinguished guest, such a Jesus, or a rabbi, the public would be invited not to eat but to at least overhear the kind of words that might fall from the distinguished guest's lips. Of course it would be that if you were reclining on your left elbow as you are eating, you're lying on kind of a couch or padded surface, your feet would then extend behind you which would make it then easy to understand why it was that this woman is able to come and to stand at the foot of Jesus, something in our culture would be extremely difficult to do the way we eat at table.

I want us to look at what this person Simon believed about the woman and what he believed about Jesus, what the woman thought about Simon and what she thought about Jesus, and how Jesus responded to the two people in the story.

LOVE AND FORGIVENESS

Simon's attitude is very obvious right at the start. He believed that this person who came was beneath him. She was beneath him at least on two counts. One is she's a woman. A good rabbi, a good Pharisee, in public kept at least six-foot distance away from a woman. It was improper to come any closer than that.

And of course women in those times were not regarded like women in our time. Furthermore, this Simon the Pharisee had a home and this person, this woman evidently walked the street. He was a noted citizen. She was a notorious citizen. Jesus says of her that she had committed many sins.

Simon the Pharisee also looked upon her as a sinner. In fact he could not see that when she knelt and the way she knelt at Jesus' feet and washed his feet with her own tears that she had become a penitent. He could only see her in one kind of way. She is a sinner. The fact remains that if you look down on a person you'll never be able to lift them up. That's why Jesus could always raise people to a new level because he didn't look down on people and he doesn't look down on you and me. But if you're trying to change human behavior in someone else by looking down on them you can never, never lift them up.

I think therefore insightfully Simon, before God, his own sins had merited him the least favored position. And therefore because God's grace has been so freely applied to his life certainly it's going to be applied to the life of someone else. For the regenerative, the saved Christian does not look upon himself as somehow better in standing as someone else. But rather sees that indeed we do not deserve to be lifted up at all. God in his own mercy through Christ has raised us up.

It so happens that this Simon the Pharisee reflects a lot of attitudes that are prevalent in life. I think for example of persons I've talked with in conversation and counseling situations who are trying to come off a background and an understanding where they have been talked down to or belittled or made to feel inferior or worthless or evil in God's eyes.

I want to use my dog as an illustration. Shortly after we were married my wife and I decided that we would like a pet, a dog. The nature of all marriages is compromise. I wanted a St. Bernard. She wanted a poodle. We compromised and got the poodle. I get to give the dog his name – Boomer, the name I had picked out for the St. Bernard. This dog is the most senseless little white poodle ever. You couldn't believe a dog could be this senseless. We always had to be careful never to open the door without someone attending it because in a split second he'll be out the door and lost. That dog has been lost and miraculously found more times than I can tell. But he is really stupid. He has no sense of his home. When he is corrected he gets into a pique. And every once in a while in a fit of rage he will even forget his house manners. Sometimes I will go to other homes where there are poodles of comparable size and I will see dogs that will set up, shake hands, bark on command, roll over. Gentle dogs, good dogs, trained dogs. I say to myself, I don't have a dog like that.

Then as I looked at how I related to Boomer I realized that my dog could have been a better dog if he'd had a better master. It was me that brought that out in him. It was me that did not train him and did not believe in him. That every time he did wrong, instead of rewarding him for doing right, I punished him for doing wrong. He never got a concept of reward for the right. All he got was punishment for the wrong. Now 10½ years I guess we're now just going to have to live with him.

LOVE AND FORGIVENESS

But almost from the moment we begin to be conscious of who we are we have these struggles. I recall in high school you look down on junior high kids. Just a few years before you were one yourself. Now they seem so utterly dumb and stupid and worthless. Not worth associating with. You get to college and look back at high school students. But the ones now seem so irreparably beyond the kind of personality development that you have had. It's possible in our personal relationship to say to a husband or wife that you see them in terms of selfishness or sloppiness or stupidity or lack of understanding. It's possible that we can put tags on people and because something has happened to them in the past say, You've been damaged. We coin terms like once you've made a mistake, that mistake is going to stay with you all your life. We think of divorce and divorcee and the like. It's so easy to apply a tag to people and to say, That's happened in your life, that mistake has been made or this error is found and you're kind of chained to that position.

This is Simon the Pharisee. This is how he looks at life. Once you're a sinner you're always a sinner. He couldn't see you to repent. He couldn't read the repentance in your heart. All he can see is what you were. He has no faith for your future. What a contrast Jesus is with Simon the Pharisee. Simon is saying, Write her off! Jesus has another perspective on her life. Just like he has another perspective on the life of every one of us who are gathered here today.

By the way, in regard to Simon the Pharisee's attitude I've been checked in my spirit. It is so easy like Simon the Pharisee to disdain someone who responds to Jesus emotionally as she did. But to see when that response is made emotionally that it comes indeed from a heart of love and a sense of trust.

How did this woman act toward Simon and toward Jesus? We know what Simon's attitude toward her is. It's striking to see how the woman related to Simon. You say, But that's not even talked about in the text. I know and that's why I think it's so significant. She related to him by ignoring him.

She could have stopped at the threshold of his courtyard and said, This is Simon the Pharisee's house and he's an all right kind of person. She's got the reputation of a leading citizen. If I go in there and get next to Jesus, I know how my emotions are. I know what he's done for me. I just won't act like I would on a normal occasion. I'd probably wind up making a fool of myself. And Simon wouldn't like that. And Simon would probably throw me out. Simon would be mean to me because Simon believes I'm a sinner.

I don't think, if she had taken into account Simon, he'd ever made it inside the house. Just like that woman there are some of you, you have got to ignore what other people think of you if you're going to get help. If you're really going to be anew creation in Jesus Christ, if you're going to get a kind of start in life which involves you living as Christ would live successfully and with the prosperity of which he speaks. That doesn't mean that others whether in your background or currently who look at you and do not believe that you've been changed, do not believe that you can be whole. You're simply going to have to lay aside that viewpoint and ignore it all together and get to Jesus. For it is Jesus where the help is at. And it's in Jesus where you'll find in believing in you and hopefully it's in the community of Jesus the church where you will find little Jesuses – Christians – who believe in you as well.

So she had faith in Jesus. She would have never attempted what she did with a Pharisee. She recognized in Jesus someone who could accept her. I believe that as Jesus reclined at the table,

LOVE AND FORGIVENESS

she kind of came to a position at his feet where she could listen to him better. But as she stood there, there evidently was a moment in her life maybe it was just a day before, hours before, when Jesus had touched her life. Then suddenly all things had become new. She stood there now in gratitude for what the Lord had done. Tears began to flow down her face. I don't believe you can preplan tears. I can hardly believe that the woman went in with the intention of anointing Jesus' feet with her tears. But something happened at the foot of Jesus that caused her to cry. Her eyes which had been in the inlets and the outlets for sins now became the fountain of repentance and blessing and confession and cleansing. So that as she stood there her crying became more than she'd ever planned. Suddenly it was as if pools of water were forming on the Lord's feet. Those feet which had been unwashed as he went in. Those feet that did not wear socks or shoes as we do but sandals. The sandals having been slipped off as would have been the custom for the meal. There would have been fine grains of sand on his feet, water was caking it and it was looking like muddy feet.

The woman seeing this takes the next step without preplanning. She takes her hair down, which again was not custom, not etiquette for a woman that day to do. Wiped his feet with her hair. Then so close to the feet of Jesus, as close as she could get to him, she did something, which is even offensive to us in this day. If we'd been sitting in the audience, we'd have said, "Ok lady, we're good Christian people. It's ok to wipe the Lord's feet I guess with your hair but that's as far as you can go. This kissing his feet is going too far. Check that."

The word that is used by the gospel writer for the kissing of his feet is to kiss ardently. It is more than simply the kiss of custom. It is the kiss of passion. And passion here in its wholesome sense. There are only two times in the gospel that is recorded that Jesus is kissed. One is here and the other is by Judas. What a difference in the kisses. It's the kind of kiss that the Ephesian elders give Paul when he is leaving their company. It's the kind of kiss that the father of the prodigal gave to his son when the son returned home. That's the kind of kiss, which she gives to Jesus.

I guess there is no other way to interpret the kingdom of God than to say it's a place where people are set free to love. And really get in touch with their feelings and express their feelings toward the Lord and toward one another.

So the woman came. The Lord had done something for her and she expressed it. What did Jesus teach Simon and the woman on this occasion and what does he teach us as well?

I find that as he comes to a moment where he will rebuke Simon that he is exceedingly gracious with Simon. That strikes me about the Lord that even though Simon is what you would say a Pharisee or we would call him a hypocrite the Lord does not come at him brutally or reproachfully or bitterly or filled with sarcasm. There is no bitterness in the Lord's life so he cannot respond bitterly. There is no sarcasm in his life so therefore he cannot respond with sarcasm. There is nothing in his life on which the enemy has a hold. So when he comes to correct Simon he first really asks Simon's permission to speak. He says to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." Then he stops. He gives Simon the opportunity to respond, if he wants the Lord to go ahead and say it. Notice how very tenderly the Lord is heading into this rebuke.

But when he does come into the rebuke his heart is filled with love. He believes Simon can change. I think that's important. We believe the Lord can save the down and outer. But we also

LOVE AND FORGIVENESS

have to believe that the Lord can save the hypocrite. That the person who has become callous toward other people doesn't always have to remain in that rut. God help us to keep from labeling people as something God would want them to come out of.

He says there were two people who had a debt. One about \$30,000 our currency and the other about \$3,000. They could not pay the debt. Here's the point. They both have a debt which they cannot pay. Jesus is very much saying to Simon, if you'd look around you'd realize that you have a debt with God you cannot pay either. The question is not how much you owe. The question is you can't pay what you do owe. It's no good comparing your debt with another person's debt. I don't believe this story should be used as a comparison as the person who has lived a flagrant life has more to be thankful for than the person who didn't live a flagrant life. They both came to Christ. For the person who didn't live a flagrant life can have a deep sense of appreciation and love and forgiveness as well. There is much to be forgiven. I came up through the straight and narrow kind of culture but I still have a lot to be forgiven of.

And Simon has a lot to be forgiven of. If the woman had lived a flagrant life and was a woman of the two Simon had a lot that was wrong in his life. That kind of condemning, reproachful attitude toward other people which was so unlike God. It's a life that needed to be changed for him. Jesus simply says both are in debt. What's the use of setting around and comparing how much you owe? Simon, the fact is you're not appreciative of the debt you owe. You do not realize how your sin has separated you from God and therefore you cannot respond with love and forgiveness and the like.

Simon needs to be forgiven for his brittle attitude. I guess Simon is representative of those who hang around religion for a while. It's possible to grow in the Lord or it's possible to grow bitter and brittle and turned in. The streams of cleansing are not flowing as represented by the tears which the woman shed.

To the woman Jesus says to her, Woman you're sins are forgiven you. What a tremendous thing I know in preaching and in church and the like, forgiveness of sin has become pat like so many other clichés but it's not a cliché. It's a deep reality and truth to really be forgiven of sin. How enormous that is for our lives.

You say, What is sin? I guess I've looked at that definition somewhat from time to time and realized there are many ways you could define sin. But the strongest definition that appeals to me in regard to sin is sin is missing the goal that I started out with. It's not only rebellion, it's not only the doing of wrong. But it's missing what I intended to be.

A playwright James Berry of Scotland said, "The life of every man is a diary in which he means to write one story and instead writes another. His saddest hour is when he compares the volume as it is with what he vowed to make it." That's meaningful to me because when I was in college, my first 2 or 3 years I kept a diary. In those days I believed I was going to be President of the United States! I thought that someday there would be historians who would look back with the insight of psychology and want to know the formative years of the 45th President of the United States, what he was thinking during that time, who his friends were and the like. I wrote very freely.

I look back and realize I am not what I intended. Sometimes I get a little wistful and nostalgic when I see the direction and here's where the maturing process really helps an enormous amount.

LOVE AND FORGIVENESS

I know what it is to put something in a diary and then to look at it and laugh later on down the line.

On a more serious level there are goals which each of us have in life. It's possible to get to living and realize how far it is one is missing attainable goals. Attainable goals like peace in the spirit, in the human spirit and in the spirit of God. Joy and the feeling of well being. A feeling that one's life is counting. That one's life is forgiven. A comparing life with how God meant it to be with the way we're living it.

This woman did something very important about her sin. She was conscious of it. There's no way I can make you conscious of sin. That's the Holy Spirit's task and he will do it. But she would have never got anywhere with a new life had she not become conscious of her sin and said "What I want to be is so unattainable. I sense that Jesus is the only one who can help me bridge from where I'm at now to where I need to be." She came. She acted to confess. There is something concrete that she didn't simply keep it in her mind. She took a concrete step and she came to Jesus. True she didn't verbalize anything but she acted it out. Whether you act it out or whether you verbalize it the important thing is the concrete step to make the transition. She came to the one who alone has the power to forgive her.

In fact Jesus' critics recognized that only God could forgive sin. And the fact that Jesus was forgiving sin meant that he was laying claim to divinity. That's his unique role. He's a specialist. He's the only specialist in the world that has that kind of authority to forgive our sins.

Forgiveness makes it possible for us to order our lives, not by the past but by the future. So much of humanistic psychology simply looks at life as where you've been. The gospel, the Christian approach to the area of psychology and the ordering of life takes it an important step further that says life can be yet. You do not have to be what you've been in the past. But the gospel can help you bridge over those boundaries and barriers and damages of the past and give you a whole new life. In Christ all things are new. Christ makes us a new creation.

So I believe that the Lord can seal off the hurts of the past so that the hurts from one generation need not be passed on to the next generation. And that in my life there can be a healing and reconciliation and a life of joy.

Jesus says to her, your sins are forgiven, your faith has made you whole. He says as well, Go in peace. Here is where the original rendering of the preposition is stronger than the English word. The English word "in" can be a rather weak preposition. But in the language in which Luke writes the preposition is "go into" peace which is the way of putting it kind of graphically. Like this one had been in one room of the house and was now to go into another room of the house. A whole new experience to go into. Luke conscious of biblical history when he writes shows how Jesus used that word "peace" which is so foundational to how we live. Peace in the scripture does not simply mean that two people quit fighting. Peace is a condition of wholeness. It's condition of integrity, completeness, soundness, well being, getting it put together. The integrated personality. Really knowing who you are and where you are and why you are. It's the whole sum of things, which allows you to go through difficult times but with a sense of balance, a sense of joy, a sense of perspective. In the deep well of your life you are basically satisfied with who you are and what you're doing and who God is and that you've been forgiven and set free.

LOVE AND FORGIVENESS

Jesus says to this woman, Go into peace.

When you look at where this woman was going you find why Jesus spoke this word. She was going back to the environment from which she came. Jesus didn't call her to a new city. He called her to simply go into peace. She had to go back to the friends she had, the people who didn't believe in her, the people who had used her and abused her. She had to go back and explain why she was different, why the life was new, why everything in her life had taken a change. She would certainly undergo the ridicule of others. She would certainly undergo disbelief that other people would look at her and say, You could never be changed; we know you.

But she had encountered Jesus who believed in her and believed in what she could be. So he said to her, Go into peace.

I submit to you that what that woman experienced is what Jesus wants every one of us to experience as well. And what the cross as we come to communion is really all about. It is to the cross that Jesus goes to make finish the work of forgiveness. There is a debt we cannot pay and Christ prayed it with his blood on Calvary. Made sin who knew no sin. Taking our sin upon him. When he came up out of that Calvary experience the first thing he said to his disciples was "Peace," all's well.

Deep in the interior of your life where the storms do rage know that there is this unshakable truth: I am real. I am risen. Sin is forgiven. Life is eternal. The grave is defeated.

God calls you to his peace and God calls us to forgiveness for our sins.

Heavenly Father, we come to you in this moment having had our hearts warmed by the story of the gospel. How your Son, our blessed savior, came into life and freely believed in a woman whom no one else believed in. Freely accepted the love, the unfeigned love of a woman whom others believed was incapable of expressing love at all. Through your belief in her and through your own power you turned her life around and you brought her to newness. Lord, I pray for every person in this room that we would have all had that same experience. If there be even one here today who has never had that turnaround moment when they've caught your word for their life – your sins be forgiven, go into peace – this would be the day as we take communion. Our own private way of reaching out to you in prayer they would open their lives to you. Lord, because I know also that it's possible for sins to collect within the Christian life I pray bring back the springtime. Bring back as we wait penitently upon you here, the joy of our first love. O Lord, give us all together a sense of newness in you, a sense of really what it is to be forgiven, a joy and a peace in the Lord and a joy and peace in believing. As we think of the things which have accumulate in our life to make us bitter or resentful or hostile I simply ask, Lord Jesus, that in this service we would set free those persons and circumstances toward which we felt real hatred. We would set them free by reaching out ourselves to forgive and believe that you can make out of a person something new and wonderful. Let our lives really be cleansed as we take of your body and blood today. Let there be fountains of cleansing within our hearts which finds us gathered around the cross all children, all lost in wonder and adoration and love. Because of what you've done for us. Let us reach out to believe that you've really called us to a life, a wonderful life, a life in which we are believed and wanted and made new. Through Jesus, our Lord. Amen.