

Luke 7:36-50
6/12/16

Psalm 5:2-3, 7, 11-12
Pentecost 4C

Forgiven

Next Sunday is Father's Day! It's just around the corner. This is a great time of year to think about all you dads and granddads and uncles and men who have been like a father to someone. This is a great time of year to reflect on all you mean to us and to say how very much we appreciate you! You've nurtured. You've guided. You've taught. You've coached. You've mentored. You've cared. That's what fathers do.

But this morning I want to talk with you about someone who *has* no father. Nor does she have a husband. Or a brother. Or a son. She has no male relative: in her day and time, a woman's only means of support. In her society, a woman has no way to make a living. Except one. And I think you can probably guess what that way is.

Once she had a name. But now she has no name. If she had a name, that would suggest that she was *somebody*, that she was a person who has relationships with others. If she had a name, that would suggest she was someone that anybody else would want to have something to do with. But that's not how it is. No

one wants to walk with her to draw water. No one wants to have a conversation with her. No one wants to share a meal with her. No one wants to claim her as family. No one wants to be her friend. All they want to do is whisper about her—whispers she can't help overhearing. She's shunned. She's nameless. She's a nobody.

Then one day, walking along a city street, she meets someone. Someone who doesn't just pass her by. She can't explain it, but somehow she knows that this One is different. He doesn't leer at her the way other men do. When he smiles at her, his eyes smile too. He has the kindest eyes she's ever seen. And he speaks to her. Like she matters. Like he cares. They don't talk for more than a few moments. They don't exchange more than a few words.

But by the time they part, something incredible has happened to her. Something wondrous. Something way down deep inside her. It's as though he understands everything there is to understand about her. And more than that. He's taken everything that's bound her—all the struggle, all the shame, all the pain—and has let it go. Everything in her that was closed up

tight, he's opened. He's loosened and untied all the hard, tangled knots within her. He's released her. He's set her free.

The next morning, she hears someone say that he's a traveling teacher. And that the evening of the following day, he'll be at the home of Simon the Pharisee, having dinner. She *has* to see him. But when she does, there's no way she can *tell* him what he's done for her. There's no way she can tell him what it means to her. There are no words. She has to *show* him.

That day and that night and the next day pass soooo slowly. Each one feels like a year. But finally, finally, the appointed hour arrives. Carrying her one possession of value, her alabaster jar, she slips into Simon's house. Slips into the dining room where Simon's guests—all male—recline on mats and cushions, their legs stretched out away from the low table.

That's where Luke picks up this nameless woman's story. Now Luke doesn't tell us that these two actually have met before. But don't you think it's likely that they have? Don't you think that the way we've envisioned their first encounter could be something like the way it really happened?

Now, at the dinner, she comes up behind him. And the tears come. She doesn't know where they come from. They just come.

Tears from the years of sorrow? Tears of repentance mingling with tears of gratitude? Welling up from a place she didn't know she had. Whatever the source, tears. Overflowing. Falling down onto his dusty feet. Washing his dusty feet.

Undoing her hair and letting it fall—loose, long, luxuriant—below her waist. Something no woman ever does in public and *especially* not in the company of men. Suddenly, without conscious thought, she's leaning over him in a gesture so intimate that her culture forbids it. She—a woman!—touching the feet of a man. And a rabbi at that! Drying his feet with her hair. Kissing his feet. Breaking open her jar and lavishly pouring its fragrant, precious contents all over his feet. Massaging costly, scented oil into the feet of Jesus.

She can feel the eyes of the dinner guests upon her. Can feel their shocked stares. Can hear their gasps. Can also hear them calling her “sinner.” And worse. It's not the first time wounding words have been hurled at her.

But their voices fade into the background when Jesus begins to speak. And after she hears his words, nothing else matters. For her past is behind her. A new future beckons. Her heart lifts. Joy fills her, springs up in her. A joy unlike any she's

ever known. Because Jesus has taken her—a nobody—and made her *somebody*.

Faith has saved her, saved her to live freely and fully. To live in hope. To live in peace. To live in shalom. She's been forgiven!

Forgiven. Forgiven? It's too much for Simon the host, Simon the Pharisee. He can't *believe* it. It's bad enough that that this uninvited, uh, *woman* has created a scene in his house. But now Jesus is *forgiving* her? Everybody knows that only God can forgive sins. Just who does this Jesus think he is?

Well. We know who *the Pharisees* think Jesus is. And what they think of him. Again and again in the gospels, Pharisees denounce Jesus for hanging out with the wrong sort of people. In Luke, Jesus tells us that he has been called out for being a “friend of sinners,” right before this account of a meal at Simon's house.

The thing about Simon is, he separates people into two groups. The first group consists of sinners—the ones Simon doesn't want Jesus to be friends with. And the second group is made up of Simons.

You've known Simons, haven't you? People who grumble about *undeserving* folk coming into the Lord's presence? People who desire and even expect God's grace for themselves, but don't want others to receive it unless and until they somehow prove themselves worthy? If you and I look deep into our innermost selves—as God does—might we discover a little of Simon in us who are the church?

Jesus' words to Simon are his words to the church, too. For early Christian communities—like Luke's—and for us today, Jesus, that master preacher, offers an illustration to help us understand. Jesus tells a parable about a creditor with two debtors. The first debtor—think of the nameless woman here—owes a great deal of money. The second debtor—who brings to mind Simon the Pharisee—owes a much smaller amount.

At least, Simon *thinks* he does. Simon believes his debt to be small. That is, the kind of debt Jesus is *really* talking about. In Simon's view, he himself has led a pretty blameless life.

But Jesus wants us to understand that Simon has a perception problem. He can't see that he too stands in need of forgiveness. And therefore, he doesn't ask for or receive forgiveness.

Maybe, in the end, Simon's eyes get opened. We don't know.

But, my brothers and sisters, I think that out of Simon's situation comes the first of two significant take-aways we get from this story of a man and a woman who encounter Jesus. It's all about discerning who we are. And then acknowledging—before God—who we are: flawed and fragile human creatures with sin-damaged natures. Confessing who we are and what we have done and what we have left undone.

At the beginning of our faith journey, and as the journey continues, how essential it is that we—again and again—recognize how deeply we need forgiveness. How great is our need. How desperately we long to set our burdens down. To be released, to be set free from all that's bound us. How we yearn for forgiveness!

I share with you the story of a Spanish father whose son, after being called to account for some misbehavior, runs away. His father sets off to find him. He searches for months to no avail. Finally, in a last, desperate effort to find him, the father puts an ad in a Madrid newspaper. The ad reads: "Dear Pablo, meet me in front of this newspaper's office building at noon on

Saturday. All is forgiven! I love you. Your father.” That Saturday, two hundred Pablos show up, all seeking forgiveness and love from their fathers.

We give thanks for forgiving fathers. Most of all, we give thanks for the forgiving One whom *Jesus* calls Father. This is the One who has loved you from your very beginning.

And this is the One who has loved the woman in Luke’s story from the beginning. This is the One who has forgiven her before she ever *gets* to Simon’s house. She’s *already* been forgiven! That’s why she loves Jesus with her hair. That’s why she anoints his feet. That’s why so much love spills out of her and flows out from her.

Jesus makes this clear when he says: *Her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; therefore she has shown great love.* Jesus invites us to see that there’s a cause-and-effect sequence going on here. The forgiveness comes before the love. This is a second understanding you and I take away from this narrative. We don’t get forgiven because we love. We love because we are forgiven!

In Jesus’ parable of the creditor who cancels both a lesser and a greater debt, the debtor who had owed more loved him

more. The more we've been forgiven for—the more we *acknowledge* all we've been forgiven for—the more able to love we become.

All because of the One who first loved us. You and I are called to love as Jesus loves. Unconditionally. The way to live into that kind of love—the way to express it—is by forgiving my sisters and brothers, even as I have received forgiveness. Even as you have received forgiveness. The forgiveness that comes through the abundant grace of God in Christ Jesus.

For at the moment when we least expect it and least deserve it, this God is lavishly pouring out grace—grace that surprises, grace that humbles, grace that moves us to tears.

Grace that's infinitely more costly than even the expensive contents of an alabaster jar. Grace that was purchased on a dark Jerusalem hillside with the poured-out, overflowing, precious blood of this friend of sinners. Of this Jesus, who prays: *Father, forgive them.*

Lord, forgive *us!*

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.