

FAITH, FORGIVENESS, AND SALVATION

A SERMON FOR ORDINARY TIME  
SUNDAY, JUNE 16, 2013  
FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH  
MARIANNA, FLORIDA  
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LUKE 7:36-8:3

There are several times in the Gospel accounts that women came close to Jesus, and anointed Him, washed His feet. Of all those stories, this one is the most touching, and the most complicated. Legend, tradition, failure to read the whole story, often concludes that the woman who washed the feet of Jesus in the house of the house of Simon the Pharisee was Mary Magdalene, but as we can see from reading the first three verses in the eighth chapter, that is not the case.

We don't know who this woman was. We know she was a sinner. Some versions of the Bible call her simply a bad woman. The conclusion that most draw is that she was a prostitute, or at the least a loose, promiscuous woman.

The contrast between her and Simon the Pharisee could not be greater. Simon is one of the righteous ones, one of the set apart ones, one of the religious leaders of his community.

The woman who washed the feet of Jesus is none of these things. One might even question what she is doing in his house, except that it is glaringly obvious that she followed Jesus there.

Simon invited Jesus over to his house, invited Him over for dinner. But Simon treated Jesus shabbily. He did not give Him even the basic hospitality of a bowl of water and a towel with which to wash His feet. He did not anoint his head with oil, as was the custom of greeting for an honored guest. He did not greet him with an embrace, a kiss, as was the custom of the day. He simply invited him to eat, and then they plopped down at the table.

Let me try to re-recreate the picture for you. The table was a low table. This was not like the table pictured in DaVinci's Last Supper. When they sat at table, it was sort of on one hip, with their feet stretched out behind them, maybe leaning their left elbows on the table as they ate with their right hands. If I got down in that position, you'd have to call 911 to get me back up. But if I had to eat my meals in that position, I'd lose weight, for sure.

Seeing Jesus there in the house of Simon the Pharisee, with dirty feet, the bad woman went and got a flask of perfume, and weeping copiously, began to wash the feet of Jesus with her tears, anointing them with the perfume and wiping them with her long, flowing hair.

Now this was a remarkable thing. For a woman to touch a man who was not her husband was unheard of; for a woman to appear in public with her hair down was unseen. A Jewish woman bound her hair up on the day of her marriage, and no one but her husband saw her with her hair down for the rest of her life. Yet this woman loosed her hair, and wiped the feet of Jesus.

Simon's thoughts were this: this is a loose woman, a prostitute, a sinner. If she were married, she'd be stoned for her behavior. What kind of a holy man, what kind of a religious leader, what kind of a prophet is this Jesus? If he was a prophet, he'd know what kind of a woman it is who is touching him, washing his feet, wiping them with her hair. Why, a Pharisee would have kicked her in the face if she'd tried something like that with him!

Jesus read Simon's mind, and replies with a parable, a teaching about forgiveness.

By the words out of his own mouth, Simon stands convicted of his sins, and of his self righteousness.

Simon was religious. God save us all from religious people. We don't need religious people. We need people of faith, people of love.

Simon didn't have faith; he didn't believe in Jesus. He didn't love Jesus. He was curious; he was attempting either to understand Jesus' appeal, or to gather more evidence against him to discredit him.

The bad woman believed in Jesus. She loved Him. Most of us learned "Jesus Loved Me" as a child, and we'll sing it in a little while. But the song we ought to sing all day everyday is, "O How I Love Jesus, O How I Love Jesus! O How I Love Jesus...because He first loved me."

I suspect, no, I believe, I know, that Jesus forgave Simon his sins of omission, and his sins of pride, prejudice, and self-righteousness.

But the sins of that bad woman were many, and grievous, and they, too were forgiven.

John Knox wrote of this passage that the climax of the story is when Jesus says, "Her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much." Love covers a multitude of sins. Love is the qualification for divine forgiveness. It is the love of Jesus which brings us forgiveness, and not just His love for us, but our love for Him.

Then, anti-climactically, Jesus adds, "But he who is forgiven little, loves little." Let's see how this works. One must be sorry for one's sins, one must repent of them, to be forgiven. One who is sorry for little, who recognizes only a few of the sins in one's own life, is indeed forgiven little, and in Simon's case, is prone to self-righteousness, and a spirit that condemns others, even Jesus.

To the bad woman, Jesus says, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace." To Simon, he says nothing. He may have got up from the table, and left the house. We cannot know, except that Jesus continued His ministry, and was supported in it, financially and otherwise, by a host of women, including the wife of Herod's steward.

Today is Father's Day. As I approach the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of my father's birth, I find myself thinking about him. Dad was not a church goer. I can probably count on my fingers the number of times my father was in church in his adult life. Except for baptisms, weddings, funerals.

His standard line was that there was nothing there but a bunch of hypocrites. Dad was in law-enforcement, and saw the seamy, sad, side of life. He knew the bad women. And he knew who made them bad. He knew the sins of the self-righteous, of the Pharisees of the 1940's and '50's and '60's. He didn't know Simon the Pharisee personally, but he knew his kind.

Yet my father was a man of faith, a man of love, a man who prayed, who read his Bible. A man who has had one son serve as a pastor for more than forty years, another ordained as an elder, and a third ordained as a deacon. My father set before his sons an example of faith, forgiveness, and love. And though he seldom went to church, I am just as sure of his salvation as I am of my own.

Faith and forgiveness are the way to salvation. To all of us who are sorry for our sins, to all of us who love Jesus, His words echo down through the centuries: "Your faith has saved you, go in peace."

But to those who judge, to those who are self-righteous, to those who are the Pharisees of the age, Jesus says, "He who is forgiven little, loves little."

Let us pray:

Lord, help us to love you with all our heart and minds and souls and lives, and to love our neighbor as ourselves. Help us to love one another as you loved us, unconditionally, and in spite of our sins. Help us to accept your forgiveness, not just for ourselves but for the sinners who surround us. In your name, Jesus we pray. Amen.