

Luke 7:36-53 The Woman At Jesus' Feet- By Rev. Amanda A. Nevin

Our passage this morning is a story filled with judgment, prejudice, sin, grace and forgiveness. Put yourself into this story. You are the Pharisee, you have heard a lot about this man named Jesus but you don't believe that he is the Son of God, a prophet or the long anticipated Messiah. You do know that he is someone important to some people and so it looks good for you to invite him to your home for dinner. It is a simple gathering, not very formal it is more of a formality that this Jesus guy has come to your home. You don't make all the usual preparations of washing the feet, or anointing the guest, it just dinner. Dinner has gone well enough, conversation was generally polite and nothing too out of the ordinary about this guy has struck you. He seems to be like so many others, a man but that's it, not a prophet. Then much to your dismay a woman of ill repute has entered your home and has fallen at your guests' Jesus' feet. She is openly weeping, rubbing her hair over his now tear soaked feet as she kisses him. You think to yourself- "gee if this guy was really a prophet he would know better, he would know this woman is a tramp, she has sinned against God and humanity, she is unworthy to be the scum on the bottom of his sandal."

And then the conversation changes, the mood is changed. Jesus speaks, "Sam/Sarah, I need your opinion on something, can you help me out?"

You respond: "sure, how can I help."

"Two people owe money to Bank of America. One owes 750,000 and one 15,000 dollars. Neither of them have any way of paying this money back and when they went to the Bank the Bank president heard their pleas and decided to cancel the debt completely. Who do you think will love the president more, who will have more gratitude towards that Bank President?"

You respond- the one who owed 750, 000.

Jesus says "you are correct."

Now you are thinking to yourself- what is he getting at, what does this have to do with any of the conversation we have had so far this evening; and why is this annoying woman still weeping at Jesus feet, why doesn't he get rid of her so we can continue on with our nice evening.

And while you have been thinking this Jesus has turned to the woman at his feet and said to you- "do you see this woman, have you even noticed her, did you even care that she has entered your home? I came here tonight and you didn't offer to clean my feet, but she hasn't stopped cleaning my feet; You didn't greet me and yet she continues to greet me with her kisses; you didn't anoint me and yet she has poured oil over my feet. While you have been decent enough in offering me a meal you haven't been the most gracious' of hosts and yet this woman, who is a sinner has been filled with more grace and compassion than any of you at this table. Her sins have been forgiven, her debt has been paid, she has been given a new start. You know, those who have understood the weight of their sin, who know they are need of forgiveness and have experienced God's forgiveness love much and know how to love others; those who don't recognize their sin, who

don't forgive others do not truly love or understand how to love." And turning to the woman he says "Your sins are forgiven, your faith has saved you, now go in peace"

How do you feel about this passage? Does it make you feel uncomfortable? Have you ever been in that position as Simon? I believe that if you aren't uncomfortable or you tell yourself you have never been Simon you are missing the point of this passage and the point of this story. I believe that each and every one of us at some point in time has been Simon. We have sat in judgement of another, pointing out their sins, condemning them for their actions, their thoughts, their words never realizing that we are the chief of sinners. In our culture where we don't like to talk about sin it is easy to use a lot of excuses and euphemisms to mask our sin. When we mess up we say "I had a bad childhood." Or when we didn't do our homework we say "my parents didn't have time to remind me or help me out." Or when we get caught with our hand in the till we say "I wasn't stealing I was just borrowing until I could repay it back." Or when we have cheated on our spouse or a girlfriend/boyfriend we say "my loved one didn't have time for me, they didn't understand me." My favorite line is go ahead and do something "it is easier to ask for forgiveness than to ask for permission," as if forgiveness is something we can easily throw around without any cost to ourselves, the ones we have hurt or to God himself. In reality we have taken all those things that are sins and have masked them as something else; we have made excuses for them and then we turn around and judge others when they have made those same mistakes or mistakes similar to ours. We point fingers at people like Jesse James who cheats on his wife Sandra Bullock; but do we point the finger at ourselves when we have cheated a friend, a boss, a loved one out of something? We point the finger at the Bernie Madoff's of the world but do we point the finger at ourselves when we have refused to pay our taxes, when we have run the red light, driven to fast, conveniently not given the money back to the clerk who gave us too much change; refused to give a tip to a server because you didn't like them or refused to forgive someone because you feel completely justified and not at fault in a broken relationship? When we sit in judgment of another, pointing our finger at them saying that they are the biggest sinner and I am no where "near as bad." We have missed the point- at our very heart, our very nature we are sinners are in need of grace and forgiveness. The point of this passage is- are we Simon who think he is so much better than the sinful woman and thus not in need of forgiveness; or are we the woman who recognizes that we are the mercy of Christ and because of his amazing love and forgiveness we can live a new life and find redemption, healing, wholeness and restoration in our life and thus are willing to fall at his feet in repentance and in faith?

Why do we act like Simon? Simon only sees the sin-stained past of the woman. He doesn't see the possibility of change or redemption. She in his esteem isn't worthy of anything but the reputation that she has made for herself as a prostitute. I think part of it is that we don't want to admit to ourselves that we are in need of help, in need of forgiveness and we don't want to admit that we aren't really that great. We live in a culture that perpetually tells us that we need self help books, that we need to just "feel better" that we aren't really that bad that it was our parents and our upbringing and if we can just simply overcome our tragic upbringing then we will rise above and be the good people we were really meant to be. I also think that it requires us to be vulnerable with ourselves, our loved ones and with each other to admit that we struggle that we have sin in our lives that we need healing from; that we make the same mistakes over and over again and of course why do we want to admit openly that we are messed up and "weak." We act like Simon because that was the cool way to act. Sit there quietly in judgment because no one needs to know what he is thinking about himself or realizing that he is in need of Christ's

forgiveness as much as the woman. It is easier to appear to have it all together than it is to come to the foot of the cross on our hands and knees and admit to God, to ourselves and even to each other that we are needy, needy of God's love and grace, in need of forgiveness and mercy.

What would it be like if we were the woman at Jesus' feet? For most commentators and people who read this passage understand sinner to be euphemism for prostitute or courtesan. This woman has a reputation- a well known reputation. Simon recognizes her for who she "is" or who he thinks she is. She is the woman that everyone knows because her sin is so great and so public. So it is easy to sit quietly in the corner and condemn her. I am sure that this woman knew that all eyes were going to be on her and I am sure that she knew that everyone knew who she was and yet she didn't care. She was more concerned with showing her deep love and affection for her Lord and Savior because she was forgiven. A lot of the commentators believe that this woman's approach to Jesus presupposes a prior experience of forgiveness and now out of a deep sense of gratitude and faith she has come to thank him and to worship him; to show him that out of her heart flows rivers of joy, gratitude and hope because she is not seen by him the way the rest of the town sees her. This woman claims no right to disturb the dinner party and so does not intrude further than to the feet of Christ. The woman is so grateful that her tears begin a chain reaction, they wet the feet of Christ and then having no towel she uses her hair to dry them, then having such gratitude in her heart she kisses Christ's feet and anoints him with an expensive bottle of perfume- mostly likely the perfume she would have used for her "work." The Pharisee keeps his thoughts to himself; but Jesus is aware of both Simon's thoughts and of the situation with this woman whose open display of love and affection he hasn't rebuffed. The Pharisee who passes judgment to this woman now becomes the one whose judgment is judged by Christ as he turns to this woman. When Christ turns to the woman, he acknowledges her existence in a way that the others have ignored. When Christ turns to her and explains her actions it's as if he is recognizing that both Simon and the woman are playing host to him and while Simon has been a decent enough host he has gone the extra mile that the woman has. Simon as a host has not been rude, his behavior has been correct, but only correct. By contrast this woman has shown the marks of thoughtfulness and honor which would mark the hospitality of a host who owed a debt of affection and gratitude to his guest. So while Simon didn't necessarily do anything wrong by not washing Christ's feet, or greeting him with a kiss or anointing his head with oil in his inaction he is showing his that Christ isn't worthy of the extra courtesy to provide such provisions and yet this woman can't stop showing Christ her love and affection for him- why?

Because this woman no longer has to live in shame, in fear or in guilt because she has been set free from her sin, her debt. She is the one who owed her life to this man and Christ has reached down and forgiven her. She recognized that she was in need of forgiveness and when she received it she couldn't stop weeping out of love and joy for a new life that she has been given through Christ's gift of forgiveness. Her sins are many and she knows it and so the forgiveness that she now feels and receives is great and so she loves greatly. The woman must have been forgiven much, because she does not fit the pattern that Christ says: little forgiveness, little love. I think if we were to honestly stop and evaluate our lives and to see all the ways that we are separated from God, from one another, the ways that we keep ourselves from having healing and wholeness in our relationships then we can begin to see truly like this woman that God's forgiveness is huge. But we hide from the truth. We are unwilling to look at our own hearts honestly and by so doing we are like the second guy in Jesus parable- sure we know that we are forgiven and we are grateful that the "small" debt is paid but it doesn't have an impact on our lives, on the way we deal with others, on our desire to be a people who learn about

forgiveness; we live content to be Simon- judging others in our hearts because we are at least “not as bad as they are.” And yet I think if we were to look to the woman’s example, to ourselves in her then maybe we would be like the person who has the greatest debt that has been forgiven and from that would flow deep wells of hope, gratitude, forgiveness for others and a desire to work on our own relationship with God and with others before we begin to point our fingers at them and at their mistakes.

What does this woman do? She comes to worship, to fall at Christ’s feet, to weep openly and express to him her love, her gratitude, her humbleness for she knows what it is like to be unloved, excluded, laughed at and pointed at. She comes in quiet humility to say thanks for the forgiveness she has received and to show her faith in Christ. It is faith which sums up the response which the woman has made to Christ. Faith in this passage and in other passages in the gospel is the one who acts decisively on the basis of the conviction that Christ is their Lord and Savior and that they are helped, redeemed, forgiven because of Christ and can do nothing but respond in joy and in gratitude of his saving grace. Christ in his infinite compassion turns to the lady and addresses her openly, freeing her of the sin that she has lived and announced that her faith has made the way for her forgiveness. In this small action Christ is illustrating how we his followers should live; we should be careful that we do not judge or condemn another. From God’s perspective this woman has approached him with faith and repentance and has received forgiveness and now from his perspective she is made whole. God’s perspective is not ours and so we the people of God should begin to learn to ask ourselves “what is God’s perspective?” Whether we are willing to recognize that we are sinners, that we are indeed people who have no claims to being “good” without the work of Christ, unless we are willing to step back and really see the amazing gift that is God’s forgiveness then we are missing part of the glory of the story of Christianity. And in the same measure unless we are learning to live out that gospel of forgiveness with others we are missing part of the power of the redeeming work of Christ in our hearts, in the hearts of others and the ability for our lives, our relationships and the work of Christ to be completed in us. Forgiveness is not easy, it requires work within our own hearts, it takes a lot of hard work and many steps and sometimes forgiveness isn’t a two way street; sometimes it is about us as individuals learning to forgive others while recognizing that we may never meet at the same table our job is to learn to look to Christ to help us in our own endeavors to forgive and allow that work of Christ to work in our hearts while praying for our enemies and those who have hurt us that Christ will be at work within them. We are not called to condemn, judge, point fingers and remain in our own prideful ways- stubborn to a fault and refusing to budge on principle; but rather to seek Christ’s love and grace to help us ask the question- how would they feel, to ask the question- would I be able to do any differently if I were in their shoes; and to learn to have God’s perspective. Forgiveness is freeing, it allows us to let go of the power that someone else holds over us and the power that we hold over ourselves. When we learn to forgive we learning to let Christ come into our hearts in a deeper way and allows him to move us in a deeper more intimate relationship with him and with the world around us. So the question to us today is this- are you going to be like Simon; stubborn, prejudice, judgmental, unforgiving; or are you going to be like the woman- receiving the healing power of Christ’s forgiveness and then falling at his feet to worship him and to learn to be a grateful people living into his forgiveness and sharing that with the world?

