

SERMON CCI Luke 7: 36- 50 Sins and Debts

This is one of Luke's best stories for me. It shows off his dramatic writing skills because the story keeps changing directions and twisting on us. About the time you've decided who is the bad guy, a sudden twist makes it clear they can't be, and you're left shaking your head. I like a story that surprises me with an unexpected turn. Luke's story could easily be an hour-long TV drama named *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*. We think it's Jesus, but is it?

It helps to have two bits of background information: First, this story takes place at a formal dinner party in ancient Palestine. Dinner parties often took place in an open courtyard. Guests at the dinner reclined on couches around a U-shaped table with their feet behind them. They typically rested on their left elbows, and ate with their right hands. I don't know what happened to the people who were left-handed.

Second, it was customary for the host to show hospitality to his guests by greeting them with three things: 1. A kiss of welcome 2. Water to wash their feet since most people traveled by foot on dusty roads 3. Oil to anoint their head.

Simon, was a Pharisee, and invited Jesus to be his guest at a dinner party. That is a bit surprising because Pharisees and Jesus did not get along well most of the time. Pharisees were very religious men who strictly followed the law and the traditions of the elders, the extra rules for faithful living that went beyond the law God gave. They washed their hands the right way, they didn't touch unclean things or people, they did not associate with the wrong kind of people. Pharisees have been called the most righteous people who have ever lived, but unfortunately, they tended to look down on people who weren't as holy as they were. And there was Jesus, who was known for doing what Pharisees never would- eating with tax collectors and sinners, touching unclean people like lepers and the disabled. And like in a good TV drama with a twist by the second commercial break, we know that something is going to disturb this pleasant, cultured scene.

And in walked what Luke calls "a woman of the city who had lived a sinful life," with an expensive alabaster jar of perfume. We don't know what her sins were, she was a prostitute maybe, or perhaps she had had an affair, but it's clear that whatever her past, both Simon and Jesus knew her. In fact, everyone may have known about her. And she began to lavish her gratitude and love on Jesus as he reclined around the table. This was more than a gushy thank you; Luke paints a rather suggestive picture here: she let her hair down, something a woman only did in the bedroom with her husband, she kissed his feet, let her tears clean his feet,

she poured perfume on his feet like a woman would apply to herself for the bedroom, caressing them gently, and drying them with her loose hair. All while the people around the table stared in shock. Outrageous!

Times have changed a lot and I wonder if we aren't as shocked by her behavior. So let's bring this story into today... we're having a church potluck BBQ at Woody and Merry's house on July 14 after worship. We're looking forward to a time of good food and fellowship. So imagine if Woody and Merry decided to surprise us with a bikini-clad young woman to dance for us like at a bachelor party. And as she danced, she went around kissing all the men. Imagine what we would think! "Outrageous! Get her out of here, we're a church, not a brothel." That's how the people felt at Simon's dinner party. Outrageous! She doesn't belong here, she's nothing but a sinner, always has been, always will be!

But Simon was focused more on Jesus' response to her. And even though he didn't say what he was thinking, Jesus heard him: "If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is—that she is a sinner." A righteous man or prophet never would have let her do these things. Simon expected Jesus to do the righteous thing, do what Simon would do- stop her, call out her sinfulness, and send her away. Just as I imagine you would expect me, as pastor, to get rid of the bikini-clad dancer at the potluck too. What should righteous people do with sinners? Push them away, make them uncomfortable enough they don't come around.

Instead, Jesus told a parable about what was really happening there. He asked, Who do you think would be more grateful- a man whose debt of five hundred denarii was graciously cancelled by the lender or the man forgiven fifty denarii? A denarii was about a day's pay. So one man owed 500 day's pay (that's how much he would make in a year and a half) and the other man owed 50 day's pay (almost 2 month's pay). There's a big difference between the debts, but the fact is, neither man could repay their debt, big or small. The first man is forgiven ten times the debt that the other man is. So who would love more?

Simon knew how to do the math, but he also understood that Jesus' parable was about more than the normal debts we all face in life. I think he had even figured out it was really about how God views sins, so he answered carefully, "*I suppose* that the man who had the bigger debt cancelled would love more." And Jesus had him. Because Jesus began to explain that the woman who had been bathing his feet with her tears had clearly been forgiven much, perhaps ten times what the others in the room, including Simon, had been forgiven. In fact, her

expression of love for Jesus highlighted how much Simon had neglected to provide even the basic respectful hospitality to his special guest much less love. He gave Jesus no kiss at the door, he offered no water for his feet or oil for his head. She had done all three to the nth degree. Her extravagant behavior was not evidence of her sinfulness; it was evidence of her having been forgiven of her sins. She was overcome by gratitude, the kind of gratitude and love understood only by someone who has been forgiven of everything. Jesus had reversed who was sinner and who was forgiven and Simon knew it.

So where do we find ourselves in this story? Because it's not over. This story of sins and debts is still playing out today. Perhaps we find ourselves in the woman who knew she was a sinner who had been graciously forgiven and she expressed her gratitude with love, even extravagant love. She just can't help herself; her debt was gone! Jesus makes clear that the way you can tell a forgiven sinner is not by how holy they act, how much money they give away, or what they say they believe, but by their love. Because people who've experienced forgiveness love others in return. I talked with a man like that last week out at Tent City 4. He loves the LORD, openly admitted he needs God's forgiveness all the time, and knew he found freedom and real life in Christ. And I saw the way he talked about and with the people in Tent City 4- he genuinely loves them, loves seeing them get their lives squared away and making it. No judgment about how they got there in the first place. Oh, he holds people to the rules, but you can hear his gratitude to God in the way he loves and serves. It was a blessing to talk with him.

Or maybe you're like the woman was before she met Jesus- carrying a burden of guilt and regret over sins in your past. There's forgiveness in Jesus Christ for you too. There is no sin or any amount of sins so big that God's grace is not bigger. Jesus paid for your sin debt on the cross; confess your sin today and find your debt wiped clean.

Or maybe we recognize Simon in ourselves this morning. It's so easy to stand in judgment on other people, to see their sins so much clearer than our own. One of the dangers of following Jesus for a long time, is that after awhile, we can develop spiritual amnesia, forgetting how much we've been forgiven. After all, we're good Christian people, we don't have a lot of big sins to confess, and the ones we do, well, they're really pretty minor stuff. Nothing major like murder or adultery, or robbery or drug addiction or prostitution like "those sinner people." More like the man who only owed 50 day's pay. We forget that even if our sin debt to God is only 50 day's pay, even if it's only 5 day's pay, we can't pay it; we still

need God's grace and forgiveness to wipe the debt away. When we forget how much God's grace has forgiven us, our ability to really love shrivels in proportion to our self-righteousness. Simon looked at the woman and saw only her bad reputation. Simon had no interest in forgiving such a person; she deserved nothing but his judgment. Jesus looked at her and saw a woman who had already been forgiven and who was filled with love for the One who had done so. Jesus' parable brings home the difficult truth that Jesus came to forgive sin, but that's only good news to those who recognize their need and want forgiveness. The woman did; Simon didn't.

Jesus' words to the woman are filled with meaning. "Go in peace." She had found peace with God. But where was she supposed to actually go in peace? Simon and the other religious leaders knew her reputation and rejected her. There was no peace to be found with them. She would always just be a sinner woman. I appreciate what Pastor Fred Craddock wrote about Jesus' words to her. "What she needs is a community of forgiven and forgiving sinners. The story screams out for a church, not just any church but one that says, "You are welcome here."¹

What a beautiful image of the church. A community of forgiven and forgiving sinners. No perfect people looking down on others or holding grudges. Just a community of people who never forget how much they've been forgiven and with a deep love for God that drives them to love and forgive other sinners and set them free. People who do their best not to hurt one another. And when others do sin against them, they forgive because they understand they're all just sinners made whole by grace. Some have been forgiven a debt of 50 day's pay and others have been forgiven much more, but no one's keeping count. A church where sinners of all kinds are welcome and find peace. Is Community Church of Issaquah that kind of church?

As we prepare to sing our hymn of response that speaks of being forgiven and forgiving, let's pause and ask ourselves: is there anyone I am choosing not to forgive? Maybe words were said too harshly, maybe they let us down, or didn't keep a confidence, or broke our trust, or treated us badly in other ways. Are we holding onto their sin debt? On the other side, are there words we know we said too harshly, or things we have done that we know we need to apologize for and haven't? To our families or friends, to people sitting right here during the stressful time you've been through the past 18 months? As you prepare to move into the future, may forgiveness flow so you can go forward in peace.

¹ Craddock, Fred B., (2000) Luke, Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, John Knox Press, p.106.