

5<sup>th</sup> June 2016 sermon notes

In all 4 gospels there is a story of a woman who at a dinner party anoints Jesus' feet with a jar of ointment so expensive it's like she won the lottery. In each case somebody protests at the use of such a valuable substance for anointing Jesus. And in each telling of this story, Jesus defends the action of the woman. As we've come to expect from the four gospel portraits of Jesus, each is a little different, and one is very different.

Luke is the only one who doesn't put this story after Jesus has entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, in the days before the crucifixion. He doesn't put it so close to Jesus' death that we make the connection between the anointing and the preparation for burial. Luke says it's the house of Simon the Pharisee, Matthew and Mark say that Simon was a healed leper. John says it is in the house of Lazarus and Martha and Mary, and it is Mary who does the anointing.

All accounts of this story agree that the ointment the woman used to anoint Jesus wasn't just expensive but was extravagant. It was so pricey that those who witnessed the act of anointing were shocked, so shocked they remembered it well and kept it in the memory of the church.

Luke has generally a slightly gentler view of the Pharisees than the others. A Pharisee named Simon invites Jesus to dinner. (Making sure we don't miss the point; Luke uses the word "Pharisee" three times.) The meal appears to follow the general lines of the intellectual classes where dinner also features discussion of issues and sometimes lively debate. In that town was a woman who lived a sinful life." is introduced. Then, as now, the expression conveyed the impression of forbidden sex. Most likely, the woman was a prostitute, though this is not stated directly.

The woman knew that Jesus was eating dinner in the home of Simon--how she "knew" is not stated. The woman's intrusion provokes a religious and social crisis. She has just barged into the home of a Pharisee, yet that Pharisee will consider her impure and unclean. In her line of work, she has no doubt consorted with gentiles. Her presence contaminates the gathering. From the DEVOUT point of view, she does not belong here.

*...and she stood behind alongside his feet weeping. The tears began to wet his feet, and she wiped (them with) the hair of her head. And she was kissing his feet and anointing (them) with perfume.*

This is a scene of great intimacy--shocking for that world, and quite foreign to ours. When the Pharisee saw this, he said to himself, "If this man really were a prophet, he would know who this woman is who is touching him; he would know what kind of sinful life she lives!"

Jesus is the town of Nain, the crowds at Nain had already hailed Jesus as a "great prophet" but Simon is not impressed. He thinks to himself that Jesus can't be much of a prophet if he doesn't know certain things about certain people, such as whether or not they are sinners. Simon specifically mentions that the woman "is touching" Jesus, which renders Jesus unclean. (Jesus knows all this, of course, but couldn't care less.)

*Jesus spoke up and said to him, "Simon, I have something to tell you." "Yes, Teacher," he said, "tell me." "There were two men who owed money to a moneylender," Jesus began. "One owed him five hundred silver coins, and the other owed him fifty. <sup>42</sup> Neither of them could pay him back, so he cancelled the debts of both. Which one, then, will love him more?"*

<sup>43</sup> *"I suppose," answered Simon, "that it would be the one who was forgiven more." "You are right," said Jesus.*

Simon had been talking to himself, but Jesus answered him anyway. Note that Jesus addresses Simon, for the first time, by name. This is because Jesus will soon make the point that the woman before them is not a category of person, but an actual human being. As the woman is a human being and deserving of dignity, so is Simon. Jesus addresses him, respectfully and personally, by name.

"Simon, I have something to tell you." "Yes, Teacher," he said, "tell me." Simon's response is encouraging--"Teacher, speak." He appears open. Jesus then tells what is often called the "parable of the two debtors." One debtor owed a huge amount, the other a much lesser one.

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The two debtors are in the same boat--"they had nothing to give." Nevertheless, the moneylender "was gracious to both" The parable is quite confrontational, though subtle--Then, Jesus appears to shift gears. He does not push the limits on the question of debt. Instead, he asks which of the debtors will love the moneylender more. The question shifts from debt to love. Simon is being asked to view the woman not in terms of her "deficiencies" but rather in terms of her "capacities."

Which one of the two debtors will love the moneylender the most? Simon responds tentatively, "I suppose," answered Simon, "that it would be the one who was forgiven more." So far, so good.

*And Jesus turned to the woman (and) was speaking to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I came into your home, and you gave me no water for my feet, but she has washed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. You did not welcome me with a kiss, but she has not stopped kissing my feet since I came. You provided no olive oil for my head, but she has covered my feet with perfume. <sup>47</sup> I tell you, then, the great love she has shown proves that her many sins have been forgiven. But whoever has been forgiven little shows only a little love."*

And he said to her, "Your sins have been released."

The story reaches its dramatic turning point--literally. Jesus "turned to the woman and was speaking to Simon." Imagine that. Jesus was "reclined," which means they were sitting at a low table with their feet spread out behind and to the right. Jesus "turned to the woman"--that is, behind and to his right--and "was speaking to Simon," who was probably about 120 degrees to his left.

"Do you see this woman?" Jesus posture reflects his attitude. He sees the woman, but Simon does not. Jesus sees a human being--moreover, one in loving action--while Simon sees only a category of person, a "sinner," who renders others "unclean."

We are then given a series of contrasts. The woman's actions are contrasted with Simon's. We are now told, for the first time, that Simon's actions thus far have been some less than hospitable. Apparently, Simon has received little grace in his life because he "loves little." He does not even meet the basic standards of hospitality.

The woman does that and much more. The woman's actions are exceptional for their extravagance. She exceeds the minimum requirements. She has "loved much" and she has done so as a result of being forgiven much. Her loving behaviour radiates from freedom and grace. The woman's sins had already been forgiven prior to the story. Her forgiveness is not as a result of her loving actions. Rather, her loving actions are an expression of forgiveness. And the ones sitting at meal with him began to say in themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?" But Jesus said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace

This turns out to have been a more hostile gathering than we had supposed. Not only was the host inhospitable, but the other participants are revealed as people who worry about theological correctness while ignoring loving action. They are, however, careful not to grouse out loud. They only "say to themselves," which is not protection at all since Jesus has already demonstrated that he can read Simon's thoughts and theirs aren't safe either, which is why Jesus praises the woman a second time. The woman didn't need to hear it. The other diners did.

The story in chapter 8 in Luke gives us a summary statement of Jesus' activity. Jesus leaves Nain and goes throughout the region "proclaiming" and "bringing good news" The disciples are mentioned and they are "together with him," along with "certain women."

Three are named: but note in particular - Mary, "the one called Magdalene," we would like to think she was Mary who anointed Jesus feet, but is certainly not so. Mary Magdalene was regarded in Western Christianity as a repentant prostitute or loose woman. These traits are not directly indicated in gospels and are rather a matter of tradition. Mary of Magdala (her hometown, a village on the shore of the Sea of Galilee) was a leading figure among those attracted to Jesus. Probably a woman of independent means. This would have been shocking in the first century middle east.