

Third Sunday After Pentecost (C/RCL)

Luke 7.36-50

June 17, 2007

Holy Trinity, Manasquan

Her motives were uncomplicated. She loved much because she was forgiven much. She's usually called the woman with the alabaster jar. We **could** call her the woman who crashed Simon's dinner party. She is, simply put, a forgiven sinner, and don't we all **want** to be just that?? St. Luke tells her story, and it's a "sticky" one. That means it's a story that succeeds because it's memorable.

Part of why we remember sticky stories is because they make our emotions kick into gear. Who can **really hear** this particular Gospel without **feeling** something?? It's not a hard-to-follow theological lecture about something we basically don't understand **or** care about. It's an incredible story about a loving God and about flawed human beings like you and me.

The setting is simple: Jesus attends a party thrown by a Pharisee, a big-wig religious guy. Jesus was invited and Jesus shows up, just like He did when He was invited by tax collectors and sinners By accepting the invitations Jesus honored the hosts, whether they were on the top or the bottom rung of the social ladder. He really didn't discriminate, which bugged the people who did.

The plot thickens when somebody who **wasn't** invited to the party drops in, too. She quietly slips in, and before anybody realizes what's happening, she's at Jesus' feet. Now in order to picture this, you've got to know that in those days guests didn't sit on chairs at a table. Dinner was served on mats, and people lay down on the floor, propping their left elbow on pillows while they ate with their right hand. 'Doesn't sound real comfortable, but it worked for them. So this woman we're talking about wasn't hiding under a tablecloth: she was in full view of all the diners, as she hovered close to Jesus and cried. Strange sight.

How hard would you have to cry to drench someone's feet?? Pretty hard. I can't imagine she went in, **planning** to do that. That kind of emotion can't be scheduled. Some floodgate in her heart unexpectedly opened in Jesus' presence. Have you ever resolved to be strong, then melted anyway? At an airport when you had to say goodbye, or in a cemetery when you had to say goodbye, or in the face of a person who hurt you or loved you especially deeply?

Jesus means a lot to this woman. We can only imagine why she crashes a party to see Him, why she risks being ridiculed and thrown out, what she hopes to ask Him or tell Him in such a public place. We don't know much about her, except that she's described as a sinner by St. Luke who narrates the story, that the host thinks of her as "that kind of woman," and that Jesus agrees she's guilty of many sins. Her tears tell a story, we're just not sure what the story is. It's better that way. It lets us insert our own.

Have you ever become so fascinated with someone that you felt you **had** to meet him or her? Have you ever been convinced that someone had something so valuable to offer you, you would move heaven and earth to get it? I think that's how this woman felt about Jesus. She may have broken into tears spontaneously, but it was no accident she was in Jesus' presence. She planned it. She'd been watching for an opportunity to approach Him. She was prepared with her alabaster jar of ointment.

Somehow her sadness over whatever her sins were, her pain over her own brokenness, her love of Jesus, all came together in an act of devotion at that dinner party. She intended all along to anoint His feet. Then when the tears unexpectedly flowed, she spontaneously let down her hair, used it as a towel, massaged His feet with oil, and rained down kisses on them. Who knows, maybe she'd heard Jesus say to the paralytic whose friends lowered him through the roof and landed him at Jesus' feet, "Friend, your sins are forgiven you" (Luke 5.20), or maybe she'd heard Him preach about forgiveness, and this was her way of showing, "How beautiful are the feet of the one who brings good news!"

Or maybe she had a whole dialogue in her head that she'd prepared, questions about whether even **she** could be forgiven for what she'd done, or a confession about how she'd made every wrong choice in the book or simply a plea for mercy, an argument that even **she** deserved a fresh start. Then she saw Him, approached Him, and was overwhelmed with emotion: remorse, love, hope, faith.... The rehearsed speech flew out of her head and she acted on automatic pilot, her heart overflowing with more than we could imagine or that she could express.

Actions speak louder than words. As she knelt in devotion, the host silently but clearly looked on in judgment, and Jesus announced, "Simon, I have something to say to you." Then Jesus told the parable about the man who forgave two men their debts, one small and one great. "Now which of them will love him more?" (Luke 7.42b) he asked Simon. Begrudgingly, because he got the point, or hesitantly, because he thought it was a trick question, the host said, "I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt" (Luke 7.43a). Yeah..... Now the woman at Jesus' feet is overhearing this whole conversation. She probably thinks she is the focus. But actually Simon is.

Jesus goes on to catalog the woman's over-the-top acts of devotion and Simon's neglect. He sums it all up with:

Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little. (Luke 7.47)

Jesus doesn't say, "She showed great **remorse**, hence her sins... have been forgiven." He says, "Her sins... have been forgiven; hence she has shown great **love**." She loves because she first was loved. Who knows how she knew? She ministers to Jesus before He ever says, "Your sins are forgiven" (Luke 7.48).

At the end, Jesus says, "Your faith has saved you...." (Luke 7.50) But the real focus of the passage is the woman's **love**, brimming over beyond words, through devoted actions, in response to God's love. It is a good and holy thing to be able to say, "Lord, I have faith in You."

But how is that possible if we don't first say **and** show, "Lord, I **love** You"?? Washing and drying His feet is no longer an option. But there are many others....

It's Father's Day weekend. A good father is a forgiving father. My father has forgiven me many things, including setting a tarp on fire when we were (legally) burning leaves in the backyard, one fall, long, long, ago; leaving my prized electric ☺ typewriter unattended in the dorm study room days on end, till it was stolen; bringing more woes to the family's VW beetle than it had ever seen before; and being out of touch days and weeks on end, needlessly causing him more worry than any Dad deserves. Maybe you can identify. I hope you can say along with me, "My sins, which are many, have been forgiven; hence I try to show much love." With parents, as well as with God, when words fail, let actions kick into gear.

At the beginning, I said this was a sticky, memorable story. The hope is that if we **remember** the story, it will **change** us. Remember the woman, the forgiven sinner, who didn't grovel at Jesus' feet, but who rained tears and kisses upon them, whose heart overflowed with sorrow over sins committed and gratitude over forgiveness received and who exuded love.... Remember the host, Simon, who loved less because he was forgiven less, not because he sinned less, but because he was simply less aware of how he had sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. Remember and weep and laugh and love in response to being forgiven. Love much because you have been forgiven much. Amen

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