

## Do You See This Woman?

(Sermon by Rev. John Dieterly, June 5, 2010)

Luke 7:36-50 (TEV) <sup>36</sup>A Pharisee invited Jesus to have dinner with him, and Jesus went to his house and sat down to eat. <sup>37</sup>In that town was a woman who lived a sinful life. She heard that Jesus was eating in the Pharisee's house, so she brought an alabaster jar full of perfume <sup>38</sup>and stood behind Jesus, by his feet, crying and wetting his feet with her tears. Then she dried his feet with her hair, kissed them, and poured the perfume on them. <sup>39</sup>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!"

<sup>40</sup>Jesus spoke up and said to him, "Simon, I have something to tell you."

"Yes, Teacher," he said, "tell me."

<sup>41</sup>"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 canceled 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. <sup>44</sup>Then he turned to the woman and said 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. <sup>45</sup>You did not welcome me with a kiss, but she has not stopped kissing my feet since I came. <sup>46</sup>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."

<sup>48</sup>Then Jesus said to the woman, "Your sins are forgiven."

<sup>49</sup>The others sitting at the table began to say to themselves, "Who is this, who even forgives sins?"

<sup>50</sup>But Jesus said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

There are quite a few things in our Gospel lesson this morning that seem rather unusual, as I mentioned in my introduction to the lesson. First of all, it seems unusual that Jesus would go to have dinner with a Pharisee. We read over and over in Scripture that Jesus was at odds with the Pharisees, and yet, here he is having dinner with one of them. Well, maybe that isn't so unusual – after all, Jesus loves all people. He is the only one who can perfectly despise the sin and love the sinner, as the saying goes. So if we think about it, we shouldn't be surprised that he would go to a Pharisee's house for dinner. In fact, I would imagine Jesus made the Pharisee feel good that he had invited Jesus. Can you even imagine the thrill of having Jesus sitting down at your table and picking up a fork to eat a piece of your home-made pie?

Then this woman comes in from the street – that seems unusual, doesn't it? But remember, in those days the dining area may not even have been inside the house, but in a courtyard. The picture we found for the front of the bulletin gives some idea of how it might have been. Doorways would be left open, especially in the summer, so that cool breezes could pass through the house and courtyard, keeping everyone comfortable. If a famous person would come to town, it was not unusual that a passerby might want to come in and meet the famous person. So it would not really be that unusual for a woman would come in from the street, having heard that Jesus was dining in the Pharisee's house, and going to him to see him, touch him and just be in his presence.

Then Scripture tells us that the woman knelt behind him at his feet as he sat at table. We can't picture that – not with the shape of our modern chairs. She would need to crawl on the floor, between the legs of the chair, to get to his feet. But we must remember that in those days, they had something like recliners, which were placed alongside the table, almost like poolside reclining chairs, again, our bulletin picture can help us to visualize this. A man might lay sort of on his side, with his feet curled up on the recliner, behind him. So a person could in fact kneel there at his feet, and let their tears drop on his feet.

Now that whole idea of washing feet with tears and applying ointment seems unusual. But in those days it was not that strange – well maybe the tears part, and using her hair to dry his feet, but not washing

the feet. People traveled mostly by walking. Roads were dusty and it would be a wonderful courtesy, when a guest would arrive from some distance, for a servant in the house to come and wash the feet of the one who had traveled. It was such a relaxing thing to do, to make a guest feel at ease and welcome, almost like we would offer a cup of coffee, or a glass of iced tea in the summertime.

We might also think it is unusual that the Pharisee expected Jesus to be such a great prophet, that he should recognize that this woman was just a sinner. Or maybe the Pharisee thought Jesus should be able to see the disgust in his face, when this woman, an obvious sinner, came into the house. And on the other hand, we might think it unusual that Jesus knew the bigoted thinking of the Pharisee. Or maybe even that wasn't so strange. It doesn't necessarily mean that Jesus could read the Pharisee's mind, but Jesus certainly knew the common attitudes of the day, and I can just imagine the show of revulsion that a holy Pharisee would show toward a common woman, a woman who obviously was a sinner, interrupting his fine dinner party, to come and seek some words of comfort from this traveling holy man.

But THEN, what is really unusual, Jesus teaches about forgiveness, and asks the Pharisee to LOOK AT THIS WOMAN. Not look at this sinner, or look down on this riff raff, but look at this WOMAN, see the person. And then, this may have been the most unusual part of the story, at least for the Pharisee, Jesus forgives her. The Pharisee didn't even want to talk to her, to recognize that she was there, in his house. He felt that to maintain his dignity, his holiness, he shouldn't even acknowledge her presence. But Jesus forgave her. Now THAT is unusual, that is more than we are often able to do, that is the unusual part of the story. I think that is a key lesson that Luke would have us learn and take to heart.

Forgiveness is something that is always a challenge for humans. Apparently, it starts young. There is a story about two brothers who were playing basketball after dinner. The game got a little rough, an argument broke out, and the older brother punched the younger brother in the nose. Mom arrived on the scene and sent them both to their rooms to calm down. After allowing some time for tempers to cool, the older brother was given a sound scolding about losing his temper and setting a better example for his younger brother. Then Mom went to talk to the younger brother. She told him that the older brother had been punished and had promised to be nice to his little brother, and then she told the younger brother, "Before you go to sleep tonight, you're going to have to forgive your brother for hitting you." After thinking for a moment, the younger brother spoke through clenched teeth. "All right, I'll forgive him tonight, but he'd better watch out tomorrow."

We can chuckle about children having a quarrel, and sometimes we even say, "They'll get over it." But how often do we adults carry our unforgiving anger to the next morning, and continue to carry ill will to the extent that relationships remain broken. I am not just referring to the pain that goes with things like broken marriages, but brothers and sisters that don't speak to one another, good friends that have a falling out, as we would call it, and never talk again. Or the one that makes me so sad, grown children who refuse to visit elderly parents, or parents who are estranged from their own children. Often I have heard the parent tell me that they don't even know why their son or daughter doesn't come to see them. They don't know what they said or did, but the so-called adult child will say, "not after mother said, so and so," or "ever since dad did this or that," and here is the nail in the coffin, "I don't want anything to do with them." And as I said, it can go both ways.

This doesn't just happen in families. Friendships are broken and never healed. Have you ever looked at another person and remembered the offense, the sin, to the extent that you cannot see the person? All you can see is the wrong, the hurt, the pain, and you can't remember the good times, the bond you once shared?

Then remember the Pharisee, and remember what Jesus said to the Pharisee: "Do you see this woman?" Have you ever seen a woman or a man, with whom you once had a close relationship, and with whom that relationship is broken? Could you reach out, and maybe just say a kind word, and ease some pain, heal some brokenness, grant some forgiveness? If you do, it will do more than heal a relationship, you will be doing as Jesus taught, you will be doing God's will, which will cause rejoicing in heaven. Amen.