

Conley Memorial Presbyterian Church, 4th Sunday After Pentecost, June 12, 2016

A Story of Two Sinners

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Luke 7:36-50

Our scripture reading this morning is a story of two different kinds of sinners, a woman who presumably is a prostitute and a Pharisee.

To fully understand the story you need to know how this woman could come in the first place without an invitation to what is obviously a banquet in honor of Jesus. It seems rather strange doesn't it?

Well the woman did not need an invitation because formal dinners in warm weather were generally held in an open courtyard of the houses of well-to-do people. The courtyards typically were square and there might be a garden or a fountain in them.

Whenever an honored guest was present, it was the custom for all kinds of people to come in to listen to what the guest had to say. These visitors would stand around the courtyard observing the meal and waiting to listen to the words of wisdom from the guest. That is why the woman could be present. She didn't break in or come uninvited. She was quite free to join the others who were present but no one expected her to do what she did.

You also need to understand that at a formal meal like this, the table was only a few inches high and guests sat in a reclining position, generally on a mat or low couch, with their legs extended.

The host of such an event always did three things when the honored guest arrived. He would touch the guest and give him a kiss of peace. William Barclay ⁽¹⁾ points out that this was a sign of respect which would never be omitted in the case of a distinguished Rabbi such as Jesus.

People back then did not wear closed shoes. They wore sandals and the roads were dusty, so the host would pour cool water over the feet of the guest to comfort and clean them. The host would also anoint the head of the honored guest with oil or incense. These things were demanded by good manners but, as the scripture reading tells us, they were not done.

So picture the scene --- the guests were reclined by the table resting on their left elbows so that their right hands were free. Their legs were stretched out pointing away from the table and their sandals had been removed. Thus any visitor standing around the table could be standing beside Jesus' feet, as the woman apparently was. That is the scene of the story as told by Luke.

Why would a Pharisee, of all people, invite Jesus as the honored guest at a banquet? If you think about it, that really is not very surprising. Jesus had a lot in common with the Pharisees. He loved the Law of Moses as much as they did and while he had issues with many Pharisees, that wasn't true for all of them. Nicodemus for example was a Pharisee who respected Jesus.

Even if Simon, the Pharisee in our story, had ulterior motives in inviting Jesus, Jesus couldn't well refuse the invitation. Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners and to refuse an invitation from a noted Pharisee would, in the words of Fred Craddock ⁽²⁾, *"... have made him as guilty of reverse prejudice as some of those who discover in our zeal to right wrongs we develop prejudices against the prejudiced, a condition that places us in the camp of those we charge with standing in the way of God's reign on earth."*

Further, *"Houses in that culture were so constructed that the woman's entrance required no break-in, and since dining occurred in a reclining position, anointing Jesus' feet should not conjure up the image of a woman crawling around under a table."*

That is the setting and what the woman does is shocking. She lets down her hair, which a woman never does in public. She falls at Jesus' feet and begins to cry, her tears falling on his feet. She dries his feet with her hair and kisses his feet while anointing them with expensive ointment.

I suspect that Jesus knew who the woman was and might have talked to her previously on the streets. He knew her background and she knew who he was. The Zondervan Historical Commentary ⁽³⁾ says that her *"... action suggests that [she] ... is so overwhelmed with the presence of Jesus and her gratitude toward him that she completely forgets her surroundings. Kissing the feet indicates reverence and gratitude."* It indicates love. Jesus has forgiven her sins and she expresses her thankfulness with love.

The other sinner in this story, Simon the Pharisee, is aghast at the actions of the woman ignoring his own unforgivable actions of not extending to Jesus the simple

courtesies that any host in that time would extend to an honored guest.

So, who is the greater sinner here --- the woman or the Pharisee?

Referring to the Pharisee's reaction to the actions of the woman, in a sermon a few years ago the Rev. Edyth Pruitt at Fairview Presbyterian in Lenoir said, "*Perhaps God's grace is always offensive unless you are the one receiving it.*"

The Pharisee was offended. He didn't see the grace that had been extended to the woman nor did he understand that forgiveness produces love.

Each of us has been given this grace, this gift of forgiveness. Do we return this gift by expressing love for others? If we truly accept the grace that is freely given to us, we do.

Amen

1. William Barclay, The Gospel of Luke, rev. ed., The Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1975.
2. Fred B. Craddock, Luke, John Knox Press, Louisville, 1990
3. Clinton E. Arnold, ed., Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary, Vol. 1, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI., 2002

Note: Scripture quotations are from the New International Version of the Bible, 2011