

Jesus' forgiveness is more than we can imagine
Sermon Preached at the Church of St. Peter & St. Paul, Marietta, GA
by the Rev. Tom Pumphrey, June 11 and 12, 2016
Proper 6, Year C, Luke 7:36-8:3 (Galatians 2:15-21)

Luke 7:36-8:3 (NRSV): One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and took his place at the table. And a woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment. Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him-- that she is a sinner." Jesus spoke up and said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." "Teacher," he replied, "Speak." "A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he canceled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?" Simon answered, "I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt." And Jesus said to him, "You have judged rightly." Then turning toward the woman, he said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. 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." Then he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?" And he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

Soon afterwards he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their resources.

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus surprises a Pharisee named Simon who has invited him to dinner. Simon was likely a righteous man, and he must have respected Jesus as also a righteous man. So Simon was surprised when Jesus received the affection of a woman known to be a sinner. Simon could not imagine that a true prophet would allow a sinner to bathe his feet or touch him in this way. But Jesus' forgiveness is more than we can imagine.

This story is sometimes confused with a story in the Gospel according to John (12:1-8), when Mary of Bethany brings a jar of expensive perfume and anoints Jesus' head with it. Judas criticizes her but Jesus affirms her actions. However, in today's reading from the Gospel according to Luke, an unnamed woman kisses Jesus' feet, bathes them with her tears, dries them with her hair and anoints his feet with ointment. She is a sinner, and Jesus' response to this sinner is what offends Simon the Pharisee.

So Jesus tells a parable to help Simon understand Jesus' actions and the woman's actions. She who has been forgiven much loves much, in contrast to Simon who did not show lavish love to Jesus, perhaps because he was unaware of the greatness of Jesus' forgiveness. Jesus' forgiveness is more than we can imagine.

In our culture, we often have a very skewed idea of what forgiveness is. Certainly, the way we operate in response to offenses is often so very different from the Christian ideal that Jesus shows us. We hear people say things like "she hasn't earned my forgiveness," or "that's unforgivable!" At another parish I served, I once heard someone say at a vestry meeting "that's unforgivable!" I thought "does he know what he's saying??" He later asked our forgiveness for

that one... And we gave it to him—not because his offense was “forgiveable” and not because he had earned our forgiveness, but because we had learned how to forgive from Jesus—the one who forgave us even though we hadn’t earned it, and long before we repented.

I’ll give you another, similar example of how this works in our culture. We use a word from Christian vocabulary like “redemption” and we completely turn its Christian meaning on its head. For instance, we say “redemption” is when a golfer who has completely botched his game later returns to the same course to get a better score. That’s redemption? That seems to say that redemption is when we’ve worked hard enough to get it right.

Christian redemption on the other hand, is a concept that comes from when another person comes along and buys a slave’s freedom. Redemption is not something you can earn, it is something done for you without you deserving it. Christian Redemption is like Jesus coming along and saying to that golfer “I’ll put your double-bogey on my scorecard, and take it off of yours. I’m doing this not because you played such a great game—you didn’t! You completely botched that hole! But I’ll take the bad score away. And you can start fresh with my help.”

I think that despite our language of tolerance, our culture is developing a moral attitude that is more black and white, more good and evil. Only now, it’s not really built on moral standard, but on popular outrage. “Good” is folks like us. “After all, we all make mistakes—right? Or that guy was probably just having a bad day. Maybe he’s got a good reason to do what he did—who am I to judge? I’ve done the same thing myself, so how can I complain?” But this is not forgiveness. This is excuse making. “Here are the reasons why I’m excusing him from really having done anything wrong.” But that’s different from forgiveness. And the proof is in the opposite reaction.

When someone does something that really gets us mad—something really beyond the pale, we demonize them. We say they are not human, but rather animals. We feel completely justified in destroying their lives in the public square because they have committed horrible sins (or at least, sins different from our own). They are “unforgivable,” and anyone who says anything different is liable for the same public humiliation.

These feelings draw from the same way we feel about terrorists, child abusers, and violent racists. Those are people for whom we can’t make excuses, so we can’t imagine forgiving them. Our anger and disgust is so strong, that it is hard to keep in check (and we might even feel that it would be wrong to keep it in check). And from there, it is easy to extend that same judgment to others whose sins are not so dramatically evil, yet we can’t make excuses for them. Perhaps even like the woman who came to Jesus at Simon’s house. This kind of “good is like me and evil is out there” attitude makes it impossible for us to be open to seeing our own flaws and sins. After all, we don’t want to be one of ‘those evil people out there.’

We cannot imagine forgiving someone who doesn’t deserve it. But Jesus’ forgiveness is more than we can imagine. Look at the family members of the victims of the shooting in Emmanuel church in Charleston. They did not make excuses for Dylann Roof’s murderous behavior. But they did forgive him. They forgave him to his face, and in public, the day after he killed their loved ones. They forgave him not because he deserved it. He did not deserve it. They forgave him because they know something of Jesus’ forgiveness in their own lives.

The family of the Amish girls shot in the Nickel Mines School reached out with forgiveness to the family of the shooter on that very same day. There were no excuses, no mitigating

circumstances to reduce the degree of evil in that man's actions. Nothing he did made up for his sin. But they showed them the forgiveness of Jesus—who forgives us more than we can imagine.

Forgiveness does not cover over the sin or ignore the crime. And forgiveness is not the same as reconciliation. Dylann Roof does not seem repentant for his crimes. So he may not reconcile with those who forgave him, and we are right to keep him in prison to protect the public. Forgiveness is not reconciliation, but forgiveness is a crucial step in the cycle of confession, forgiveness, repentance and reconciliation. Jesus came to reconcile us to him, and his first step is forgiveness—even forgiveness that is more than we can imagine. Jesus' forgiveness says "That was wrong, and I love you anyway."

So what about us? Can we forgive that way? It is especially hard to forgive someone who has not repented. And we may need to maintain healthy boundaries even when we do forgive. But are we able to give forgiveness when our adversary has truly hurt us? When we can't find an excuse? We may not be able to imagine that kind of forgiveness, but we can feel it in our lives. And if we can feel it, we can share it.

Somewhere along the line, each of us comes to grips with our own sin. No excuses, no mitigating circumstances. We know we were wrong, and we know we don't deserve anything. We try to avoid it, because we would fear the scorn and shame that we freely lump on the unpopular sinners. When we can't hide from the truth ourselves, we feel bound, trapped, and "unforgiveable." We can't imagine that God could possibly forgive us or love us. We can't even get repentance right. But Jesus' love and forgiveness is more than we can imagine.

John Newton was once a slaveship captain. He saw the murderous consequences of his trade. And when he finally came to grips with his own sin, he discovered that Jesus' forgiveness is more than we can imagine. He was bound in sin, but Jesus set him free. So he wrote the famous hymn "Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me." He didn't make or ask for excuses for his sins. He said rather "I know two things: that I am a great sinner, and Christ is a great savior."

Jesus' forgiveness means saying "You really hurt me, but I love you anyway. Not because you've earned it, but because it is my gift to you." This is God's gift to us—and the woman at Jesus' feet understood the depth of this gift far better than Simon.

The woman who bathed Jesus' feet with her tears loved him so much, because he forgave her great sins. This Gospel reading is an invitation to receive Jesus' amazing grace and unimaginable forgiveness. When we open ourselves to this incredible gift from God, we will join with this woman in lavish love for our Lord.

Where are you like this woman who came to Jesus? Where would Jesus' forgiveness free you from sin and shame? Where are you like Simon? How might you more deeply open your heart to Jesus' forgiveness?

When you feel the depth of Jesus' forgiveness, let the relief of that, the joy of that, the freedom of that forgiveness ignite your love for God. And in your joy in God's grace, you will learn to forgive others more than you can imagine.