

Jesus Forgives a Sinful Woman **Luke 7:36-50**

One of the Pharisees asked him to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and reclined at table. And behold, a woman of the city, who was a sinner, when she learned that he was reclining at table in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster flask of ointment, and standing behind him at his feet, weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears and wiped them with the hair of her head and kissed his feet and anointed them with the ointment. Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner." And Jesus answering said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." And he answered, "Say it, Teacher." "A certain moneylender had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he cancelled the debt of both. Now which of them will love him more?" Simon answered, "The one, I suppose, for whom he cancelled the larger debt." And he 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 wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss 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 are many, are forgiven – for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little." And he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." Then those who were at 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." (English Standard Version – ESV)

Background:

- Jesus violated social taboos to reach the marginalized, not only racially (7:1-10), economically (7:11-17) and religiously (7:24-35), but also morally (7:36-50).
- It was considered virtuous to invite a teacher over for dinner, especially if the teacher were from out of town or had just taught at the synagogue. That they are "reclining" (v. 36) rather than sitting indicates that they are using couches rather than chairs
- That this woman is a "sinner" (v. 37) may imply that she is a prostitute, or at least a woman known to be morally loose and likely seeking something disreputable. Religious people often opened their homes for the poor. In banquets where uninvited people could enter, they were to remain quiet and away from the couches, observing the discussions of host and guests. Alabaster was considered the most appropriate container for perfume.
- Jewish people did not consider perfume sinful, but this woman regarded as a "sinner" and uses perfume as a tool of her trade. Jesus' acceptance of the gift of perfuming would offend religious sensitivities. That she stands "behind him" (v. 38) and anoints his feet instead of his head has to do with the posture of guests reclining on the couches. Jesus would have had his left arm on the table and his feet away from the table toward the wall.

- Adult women who were religious were expected to be married and thus would have their heads covered, so any woman with her hair exposed to public view would be considered promiscuous.

- Some scholars have argued that Aramaic lacks a term for gratitude, hence, “Which will love him more?” (v. 42) rather than, as we might expect, “Which will be more grateful?” Although debts were to be forgiven in the seventh year, experts in the law had found a way to get around that requirement. Those who could not pay could be imprisoned, temporarily enslaved or have certain goods confiscated; but this creditor goes beyond the letter of the law and extends mercy.

- Hospitality included providing water for the feet, but well-to-do householders left the washing to servants. The oft-invoked example of Abraham’s hospitality (Genesis 18:4) would render the host without excuse. Oil for the dry skin on one’s head would also be a thoughtful act. A kiss was an affectionate or respectful form of greeting.

Questions:

- + What is different about how the Pharisee responded to the woman and how Jesus responded? What can be known about the Pharisee based on the quote of his thoughts about the woman? What can be known about Jesus based upon his response to what the Pharisee was thinking?
- + By esteeming the woman Jesus insults the Pharisee in public. Was he right to do so? Why? What type of people do you look down on? Why? How does Jesus want you to treat them? The woman showed Jesus tremendous gratitude? How can you show Jesus your gratitude?
- + What does Jesus mean by saying that the woman’s sins are forgiven, “for she loved much?” What is the greatest act of forgiveness ever extended to you? How did you respond to it? The woman did not sin against Jesus, yet he forgives her? What does this say about Jesus? Does the statement “your faith has saved you; go in peace” apply to you? Why or why not?