

Parables are meant to shock us. They're meant to overturn our usual way of seeing things. They're meant to open our eyes to see in a new way.

So **listen** for the shocking; listen for a new way of seeing; listen for something that opens your eyes and your understanding as I read today's Scripture from the gospel of Luke.

### **Luke 7:36-50**

One of the Pharisees invited Jesus to eat with him. After he entered the Pharisee's home, he took his place at the table.<sup>37</sup> Meanwhile, a woman from the city, a sinner, discovered that Jesus was dining in the Pharisee's house. She brought perfumed oil in a vase made of alabaster.<sup>38</sup> Standing behind him at his feet and crying, she began to wet his feet with her tears. She wiped them with her hair, kissed them, and poured the oil on them.<sup>39</sup> When the Pharisee who had invited Jesus saw what was happening, he said to himself, If this man were a prophet, he would know what kind of woman is touching him. He would know that she is a sinner.

<sup>40</sup> Jesus replied, "Simon, I have something to say to you."

"Teacher, speak," he said.

<sup>41</sup> "A certain lender had two debtors. One owed enough money to pay five hundred people for a day's work. The other owed enough money for fifty.<sup>42</sup> When they couldn't pay, the lender forgave the debts of them both. Which of them will love him more?"

<sup>43</sup> Simon replied, "I suppose the one who had the largest debt canceled."

Jesus said, "You have judged correctly."

<sup>44</sup> Jesus turned to the woman and said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? When I entered your home, you didn't give me water for my feet, but she wet my feet with tears and wiped them with her hair.<sup>45</sup> You didn't greet me with a kiss, but she hasn't stopped kissing my feet since I came in.<sup>46</sup> You didn't anoint my head with oil, but she has poured perfumed oil on my feet.<sup>47</sup> This is why I tell you that her many sins have been forgiven; so she has shown great love. The one who is forgiven little loves little."

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

<sup>49</sup> The other table guests began to say among themselves, "Who is this person that even forgives sins?"

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

Did you hear anything shocking or eye-opening? Did you hear something new in that reading?

I didn't, at least at first. As I prepared for this sermon this week I kept coming up feeling a little flat. It seemed as if I was missing something.

My starword (remember starwords?) My starword for the year is "Pathfinding" so bear with me as we find a path that is faithful and true; a path that leads to good news in this reading today.

Remember a few weeks ago, we heard Jesus proclaim his own mission statement, reading from the book of Isaiah, *“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me.*

*He has sent me to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to liberate the oppressed,*

<sup>19</sup> *and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.*

*“Today, this scripture has been fulfilled just as you heard it.”*

That’s the lens we use to make sense of Jesus and what **he** understood his life to be about.

So as we come to this domestic scene, with the words of Isaiah still ringing in our ears, it’s relevant to ask: what about this story is “good news to the poor”? How is this proclaiming “release to the prisoners, recovery of sight to the blind, and liberation to the oppressed?” How is this story illustrating Jesus’ proclamation of the year of the Lord’s favor?

And again, how is this parable disruptive to our usual way of understanding things?

I can imagine that if I was poor, this wouldn’t sound like particularly good news to me. Forgiveness is one thing when you’re full but something entirely different when you don’t know where your next meal is coming from.

I can’t imagine this sounds especially **good** to the oppressed either. How does this address their oppression?

If we stretch the understanding of oppression and blindness to include spiritual oppression and blindness, this may sound like liberation and recovery of sight, in a sense. Jesus is obviously asking the Pharisee to see that forgiveness is related to love and that Jesus has the right to forgive, though forgiveness comes only from God. Forgiveness surely relieves a certain oppression and restores the ability to see or understand clearly.

But, that seems a bit of a stretch to me. One way we tame the Bible is by reading ourselves into the story instead of letting the story read us: personally and culturally. If we want to preserve the shock the parable intended, we should go back to the story.

Jesus is invited to a meal at the home of a Pharisee. Despite the way we tend to lump Pharisees, Sadducees and Scribes into one and paint them all with the same brush, in the 1<sup>st</sup> century of all of the groups, the Pharisees were most like Jesus. This Pharisee obviously accepted Jesus, at least at some level. Pharisees were very concerned about ritual cleanliness so inviting Jesus to eat with him, meant Simon considered Jesus to be clean, worthy of his company. We might say, he recognized Jesus as an insider, ‘one of his tribe.’

It’s a little more nuanced when we see that Jesus came in and just sat down receiving none of the ritual welcome that would have been expected and that Jesus names as evidence of Simon’s poor hospitality. But, maybe it was evidence of Simon’s disregard for Jesus himself. He was willing to

eat with Jesus but wasn't going to go out of his way to honor him: no kiss, no basin of water for him to wash his feet as would have been expected in that culture.

“Meanwhile, a woman from the city, a sinner, discovered that Jesus was dining in the Pharisee’s house.” Homes were open to the street in that culture, so this woman could have seen Jesus as she passed by or she could have heard on the street where he could be found. So she walks right in. It would have been easy for her to do that but it would **not** have been expected or acceptable.

She was “a woman from the city, a sinner.” Another version says she was “a known sinner.” We aren't told exactly what her sin was but there are implications. She had access to an alabaster vase full of perfumed oil. An alabaster jar of ointment would have been costly so it is likely that this woman was a prostitute even though that is not specifically named. Whatever her sin, her presence and her actions are scandalous especially for a Pharisee. Her very presence as a woman and even more so as a prostitute would have made everyone and everything there unclean. She ritually contaminated the home and everyone present by simply being there. And then she proceeds to scandalize them all further by letting down her hair, touching Jesus inappropriately, kissing his feet and weeping as she washed them with her tears and oil.

Simon is shocked, scandalized, thinking, “If Jesus really were a prophet, he would know what kind of woman is touching him. He would know that she is a sinner.” And Jesus reveals that he **does** know. He even knows what is in **Simon’s** heart.

So, he tells a parable, a story that describes forgiveness. Simon, calling Jesus teacher, seems willing to hear and to learn. He hears Jesus describe the power of forgiveness to transform lives. He hears that when we perceive our sins as small, forgiveness seems a small gift. But when we understand that our sins are huge, forgiveness is received as a great treasure.

Then, Jesus shifts the scene. He asks Simon to open not only his eyes but his heart, to see clearly. Jesus turns to the woman while speaking to Simon, and asks “Do you **see** this woman?” And then he proceeds to describe the true hospitality that the woman offered him; hospitality that in that culture, Simon, **as host** was expected and even **required** to offer.

The woman acts with **true** hospitality. It may be Simon’s home but the woman has truly invited Jesus in as welcome friend. There is no holding back, no qualification of her love.

She recognized her great sins. She recognized the great gift of forgiveness and poured herself out with great love.

But, that’s not the whole story. We’ve still made some assumptions. We’ve still read ourselves into the story instead of letting the story read us.

Listen to Jesus' words:           Your sins are forgiven.  
   Your faith has saved you.  
   Go in peace.

Jesus does not say "You are saved because your sins are forgiven." He does not say your actions saved you. Jesus makes it clear that he is **stating reality**, not creating it by pronouncing her forgiveness. She has **already** been forgiven and therefore shows great love. Understanding the magnitude of the grace shown her results in gratitude.

But, there's even more than that. In verse 38 we hear, "<sup>38</sup> Standing behind him at his feet and crying, she began to wet his feet with her tears." She's been named a sinner and a sinner with perhaps some wealth so we make assumptions. All the evidence we have points to her being a prostitute since in that culture that is the only way a woman on her own could stay alive.

But, we assume her tears are tears of **remorse** for her sins or tears of **thankfulness** for the forgiveness she has already received from Jesus. It doesn't say that. And while all evidence points to her being a prostitute it doesn't say that either, although Luke and Jesus did not hesitate to name that reality when it was important. It doesn't say that her "many sins" were even **related** to prostitution. Maybe her many sins were totally unrelated to that circumstance out of her control. So, maybe it is not important.

What we don't know here is **why** she was a prostitute. Current evidence from newer archaeological and sociological research has determined that up to 50% of women in this occupied region, where Rome ruled and Roman soldiers maintained order, up to 50% of the non-Roman women were prostitutes. And even to call them women is a mischaracterization. To understand the harsh reality of life in this situation, we should think of situations like Afghanistan or other places where war and foreign occupation distort all of life. Poverty was so great in that time that fathers sold daughters into slavery because that was the only way the family could survive. And before we judge fathers too harshly, they lived one crop failure away from starvation and death. No crop, no seeds for the new year. Any profit was required as taxes by the occupying government. Girls, already seen as property were further seen as a means to survival.

Being sold into slavery meant being sold into **sex** slavery since that was the most valuable currency in that place with so many soldiers around. So, these are not really women as we would understand the term. Girls were sold as early as when puberty began. Most women named prostitutes in the Bible were probably as young as 14 and probably no older than 18 since the life of a prostitute was short and brutal.

So, maybe this unnamed woman, girl really, was **not** crying tears of remorse at all. Maybe her tears were tears of despair and hopelessness. Jesus was known to eat with/to be friends with/ to accept sinners and she was a sinner (not because of the work she did; She had no control over that!) But because she was human! She too was a sinner just as was Simon and every other person there... and every person here.

Maybe the path into the scandal of this parable is that Simon totally misheard it, just as we misheard it. Maybe the scandal is that **Simon** is the one who has sinned greatly and has been forgiven much. Maybe Simon has further sinned by not recognizing that great gift, by not welcoming Jesus as friend and guest and savior.

The girl is rejected by her culture for a life over which she is no control. Notice Jesus does NOT say, "Go and sin no more." He **did** say that in other instances but not here. But, Simon, honored in his culture did not receive Jesus as the honored guest as he should have. He did not receive Jesus as the one who had forgiven his many sins.

The good news for the poor is that Jesus sees them. He sees their poverty and the life they are forced into because of it. The good news for the oppressed and the blind and prisoner is that Jesus sees them; sees their goodness. Sees that they too are created in the image of God and loved beyond measure.

The path into this story is the path we're always given in this walk with Jesus. Do Justice. Love Kindness. Walk Humbly with God. Our sins are already forgiven. When we recognize that; when we can accept that great gift, our lives overflow with joy and thanksgiving. When we maintain boundaries that name the other as a greater sinner than ourselves we cannot see our great need and we cannot see the great gift of forgiveness and relationship that Jesus offer.

Your sins are forgiven.  
Your faith has saved you.  
Go in peace.