

A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church

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“Filling In the Gaps”

Luke 7: 36-50

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There are times in the bible when what isn't there is as important as what is there. This inspired gift leaves room for our imaginations and in fact, requires us to make use of them. When you look at it with eyes of faith and remember how creative our God is, it seems clear that we're suppose to have some fun in the gaps.

In fact, as I understand it, the midrash... are sort of Old Testament commentaries that are as much about what's missing as they are about what's there. In other words, our spiritual ancestors understood this about scripture and weren't at all threatened by it and understood their response was being called forth. We're supposed to be in the gaps, thinking and wondering and imagining.

Today's gospel reading has a couple of gaps. Clearly there's a story missing... something Luke decided not to tell and perhaps not because he was running short on papyrus but because he wanted us to imagine what had happened to this lady of the night before she interrupted this dinner party.

Who was she? What happened to her? And most important of all, what happened between her and Jesus to prompt this out pouring of affection. Something happened.

My guess is... earlier that day. She'd heard Jesus was teaching out on the edge of town and that anyone and everyone was welcome. So she went... and on that day, Jesus busted out the Parable about the Two Sons.

He didn't tell it once, you know. What preacher only uses a great story like that one time (an idea from Barbara Brown Taylor). Like most preachers he told the story and worked on it along the way.

Maybe he even experimented with it.... **“A certain man had three sons... the younger was a real stinker... the eldest a real bore... and the third was a classic middle child who ran back and forth between his estranged brothers trying to make peace and who always felt his father's pain.”**

Sometimes when he told it... the prodigal ended up in a far country incredibly successful in the worlds' eyes. Sometimes the younger son was taken advantage of by the world... Sometimes it was his own fault, his “riotous living” as Luke finally recorded it.

The Father, however, in every version... was always on the porch watching the horizon... And no matter what prompts the son's return, ALWAYS... ALWAYS when the son is a long way off the father runs to him. That part never changed.

Nor did the part about how he threw his arms around him and couldn't stop kissing him.

I'm thinking that was the part of the story that did it for the woman that day. She happened to show up on the day Jesus happened to tell that story again. And it was somehow about her now and not some character in Jesus' wonderful imagination.

It was her story. She was a sinful woman... she was. And her sin and the world's Sin (maybe like it is for all of us) had along time back become a kind of chicken and egg thing for her.

For years she'd tried to blame society and her family and her faith community... and the truth was, that was justified... What else is a lonely woman to do in that culture? But there was also her and there were her choices.

And there was her heart...

And along the way she'd come to be more honest about the darkness of it and she'd given up on pointing fingers. She was just lost... and she felt hopeless... and as far as she knew God was off somewhere saying, **"I told you so."**

But then she went out to the edge of town one day and there was Jesus with his story about a father who runs to a lost son when he's still a long way off. She met Jesus, with his can't-stop-kissing-the-sinful-son Father. And it was her day to hear it... and hear him. It wasn't just about the words.

There is something about someone truly present to the Divine and to people and Jesus was. So, it was the way he said it... **"He wasn't like other teachers,"** folks often said, **"There is a different kind of authority in him."**

Somehow... in spite of the fact that there was the usual multitude gathered, the day and the story were for her.

It was she who was returning to the Father...

She was the one embraced

And the party was in her honor.

And she knew she was forgiven.

And with the weight of a lifetime of brokenness lifted... She floated home and later when she heard he was having dinner over at Simon's house, she grabbed the only possession she was proud of, some expensive perfume her grandmother had left her, and she went to Simon's house with some notion that she wanted to do something for this One who had graced her so.

It wasn't an odd thing, by the way, that she could get near this table and this conversation. Simon probably had money and his home had a courtyard where meals would be shared around a low table. And the meal was always a place of conversation and communion.

Probably, especially, when some rabbi of note was in town, folks would gather around the edges, even if they weren't eating, to try and take in some of the dialogue.

That's the moment this woman moves in on. Luke doesn't give us her name... he just describes the sensual scene for us.

A woman of the street, who can't stop crying, kneels at his feet and "lets her hair down." And that's no small little detail. There are a lot of definitions of grace... you can probably quote something you learned in Sunday School about unmerited favor. But I like this one... *You know someone has been graced when they can let their hair down.*

(I've let my hair down, I know) People let their hair down when they stop worrying about your judgment. They become themselves when they don't think they're being evaluated.

She lets her hair down...

and does what she can do...

offers what she can offer.

It's interesting what God's love does to our gifts. Peter, the fisherman, goes fishing for men. And this woman, a prostitute, offers a gift of soothing touch. Her gifts and who she was, offered now to Jesus.

Her tears wetting his dry, tired feet.

Her best perfume... probably tools of the trade.

The kisses she can't stop giving.

And in his love for her he lets her love him.

Did all you Type A, Self-reliant types hear that? Did you folks who like to be one up in the "favor column" hear that? It was an act of love to let himself be loved. ... To let her serve him...

And, of course, this is a problem for his host. He lives in a culture that's all about purity. He's a product of purity. And before we all jump on the "we hate Simon bandwagon," let's just remind ourselves that Simon is a good guy, really.

We would welcome him here with open arms...

He's a good, moral person.

A leader in the community.

An intelligent man.

Probably has some money. And we wouldn't mean to but we'd find ourselves a little pumped up that someone of such stature joined our church. "Simon's coming on promise of a letter, everybody say, Amen." There would be a rousing "Amen." And before we could catch ourselves we'd be thinking, **"I'll bet he can help us with the 350 x 350 campaign."**

Which means, we're more in his sandals than hers. We're not so much "prone to wander" as the hymn says, we're more "prone to sit in judgment." It's the curse of respectability. The hazard of being an insider. We pretty much stay in evaluation mode.

"Simon, do you see this woman?" And of course, it's rhetorical... because he doesn't see her. When we're stuck in the sins of critique and comparison, we don't see people.

We see titles...

We see performance...

We see beliefs and doctrines...or sins or failures.

We see anything and everything but not a fellow human being... not another child of God in whom God's image dwells. We certainly don't see a fellow sinner. Judgementalism, say the saints, is the last and hardest sin to conquer. It's so ugly because it's so hard to see in ourselves.

He doesn't see this woman...

nor does he see himself...

he's totally blind.

The mirror in his own heart is clouded... and he's drifting away from God. And it's so dangerous because he doesn't know it. He cannot see his own darkness. That's a bad place to be. I think maybe it's true... that the greatest wounds the world knows are inflicted by those who cannot see their own sin.

I love that little story from the desert fathers... Like Jesus they often used stories of the spiritual masters to teach wisdom and I especially love this one.

One day the brothers sent word to the Abbot that they had caught one of their own in a terrible sin. The Abbot arrived sometime later carrying a sack of grain on his back. The sack of grain had a hole in it and grain was pouring out as he walked.

The monks asked him what the meaning of this was and he said, "I'm coming to judge my brother and I'm blind to my own sins pouring out behind me."

The judging mind tends to be a blind mind. It has no way to humility.

"Never look down on anyone," the desert Fathers said, **"you do not know where the spirit of God prefers to dwell in them or in you."**

The judging mind assumes it knows, and to assume we know God's mind is most always destructive.

Of course, it's not just that it's bad for the one's we judge and toxic to the world... it's bad for us. Being unmerciful blocks everything. An unforgiving spirit is metaphysical damn to God's mercy... for us and everyone.

And it's that mercy that this story is about and what Jesus is about.

Jesus turns the talk to forgiveness. Someone who knows they've been forgiven loves a lot, which is a good thing... and really the point of any journey, becoming one who loves... And she does... and at the end he announces that her sins are forgiven.

And it's important to say, that she didn't get forgiveness because she loved. She didn't get it because she broke open some perfume and kissed his feet.

She got forgiveness because she needed forgiveness and knew it. Jesus simply announces what is true. He declares the year of Jubilee, is the way he put it in one sermon. He's the one here to say that all debts are canceled.

He's here to say that mercy is what flows from God's heart and it's yours if you know you need it. There's an ocean of mercy and all it needs is some harbor to receive it... it just flows in.

In Jesus she experienced and we experience what is true ontologically in God's heart. It's true already. Jesus doesn't die to change God... he dies to change us. When the woman weeps at his feet it doesn't change Jesus' heart. She weeps because her heart has been changed.

She welcomed Jesus and his love into her life. Unlike Simon... she was the real host. He didn't welcome Jesus which means for Simon... sadly... what Jesus brings with him, still hasn't been received.

"The one who welcomes me," Jesus said, **"Welcomes my father."**

It's a powerful story and I'm so glad Luke recorded it... He didn't tell us about the story that led to it... Nor did he tell us about the one that followed. It's the one about how Jesus went down to the market the next day... and there was small group of folks he'd asked to meet him there because he wanted to talk to them one on one.

It was a diverse group... There was a tax collector and a political zealot... There was a housewife... two tent-makers... a Pharisee and the woman who had washed his feet.

He spoke briefly about God's grace and about how, because they were poor in Spirit, the Kingdom was all theirs. Then he gave them each some specific guidance.

To the tax collector he said, **"Your materialism is poisonous and if you don't change it will overwhelm you and you'll forget this day. So... go home and for the next year I want you to give something away everyday."**

To the housewife he said, **"Remember that every sacrifice you make is an offering of love to God."** Remember God when you change diapers.

To the Zealot he said, **"Every morning, you must find a quiet place and enjoy the sunrise and every night at dinner I want you to tell a joke."**

To the Pharisee, who was so well studied, he simply said, **"The longing for the experience of God has not yet fallen on you like a fire."** (*a desert saying*)

To the Tent Makers who were devout and had a thriving business he said, **"I want you to consider hiring this woman standing behind you. She's my follower now and needs your help."**

The last in line was the woman... and he said to her what I imagine he might say to us all... **"Thank you for loving me... and would you do me a favor. Everyday I want you to go down to the pond and look into and see your reflection and remember that you are a beautiful child of God."**