

A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church
“Forgiven”
By Eric Gilchrest
Luke 7:36-50
June 13, 2010

For today’s service we have two very powerful texts. First, the story of Nathan confronting David contains, perhaps, the best punch-line in the entire Bible: “You’re the man!” . . . Mind you, every time I hear that punchline, it sounds more like the punchline of a Bud Light commercial than it does a classic biblical passage. Nevertheless . . .

Second, today’s gospel reading from Luke depicts a poignant scene, one that could easily be turned into a Hollywood blockbuster. A teary-eyed harlot with a heart of gold comes grasping the feet of Jesus, wiping them with her hair as a Pharisee with a heart of stone sits in judgment. I can see this on the big screen. . . . It’s just a good story. . . . In fact, the other day I was speaking with a friend about these two texts and she said to me, “You know sometimes you wish you could just read Scripture and forget about the sermon.” And that got me thinking . . . Was she trying to tell me something about my preaching?! . . .

Nevertheless, she had a good point. Why not let the story tell itself? And so that is what I will try to do; it’s something I’m calling *Lectio Narrativa*. . . .And yes, I made that up. I will read the gospel passage two times during the sermon allowing you to enter the narrative as two different characters. The first time through you will enter the story as the sinful woman who washes Jesus’ feet. The second time through as the Pharisee. On each reading, allow the world of the text to become your world; see its sights, smell its smells, taste its tastes, and most importantly feel the passion and the emotions of the character. . . . Feel free to close your eyes.

You are in the small town of Nain, in Galilee in 30 AD. The streets are abuzz with people talking about Jesus’ miracle that just happened yesterday. He raised a young man from the dead! He walked over to the coffin, and without any pomp or circumstance he touched it and the man sat up as if he was just playing a game. As if he had been sleeping the entire time.

But for you, the power of this Jesus is so much more personal. Yes he raised this young man from the dead, but he did nothing less miraculous in your own life. He also raised you from the dead. No, you weren’t really *dead*, but you were dead. And Jesus has given you resurrection. He has released you from the sins that have plagued your life and replaced them with a heart that yearns for Him. You know your sins . . . *everybody* in this small town knows your sins.

Luke 7:36-50 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 behold, you, *a sinner*, when you 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, you began to wet his feet with your tears and wipe them with your hair and kiss his feet and anoint them with the ointment. Now when the Pharisee who had invited Jesus 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." "Teacher," he replied, "speak."

"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 Jesus said to him, "You have judged rightly."

Then turning, Jesus looked at you and 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 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 are many, are forgiven— for she loved much. But the one who is forgiven little, loves little." And Jesus then said to you, "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 again he said to you, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

So how did it feel? Did you feel the humility that she must of felt as she walked into a room filled with some of Galilee's most powerful men—most of whom probably looked down on you not just because you are a sinner, though certainly that, but simply because you're a woman? And did you feel the hesitation she must have felt as she walked into the room knowing that she, an unclean woman, was in the house of a Pharisee, the cleanest of clean?

Or maybe there was no hesitation. Maybe you walked into that room with utter confidence. And not a confidence that arises from within, but something like reckless abandon. You knew what you had to do and you were going to do it no matter what the consequences. The power of the person of Jesus required you to do this humiliating act.

When Jesus turned to you and looked into your tear stained eyes and said to Simon, "Do you see this woman?," what thoughts went through your mind? Were you thinking, "Of course he doesn't see me." Or maybe you were thinking, "I don't care if that man sees me or not – I know that my Jesus sees me. He sees *me*."

And those tears. Why were you crying so? You had enough tears to wash both of Jesus' feet. Feet that were covered in dirt from a day's walk on dusty roads with nothing more than a pair of first-century Birkenstocks. . . . Let me say this to you: pay attention to those tears. Press

into the emotion behind those tears. Behind them lie secrets about who you are; a you that you might not even be aware of. And more importantly, God speaks through those tears. He tells you where you came from and where He is taking you. Pay attention to your tears.

(PAUSE TO BREAK THEIR CHARACTER) Ok, we have all played the role of the sinner. We continue to play the role of the sinner. In some ways, it is easy to place ourselves into this story as the sinful woman . . . ironically, she's the good guy! We are naturally drawn to empathize with this character because she loves Jesus deeply, and Jesus loves her back. Despite a lifetime of glaring faults, she got it right this time.

But in life we never play just one role. Sometimes we also play the role of the Pharisee. And before I read the passage again, I want you to prepare yourself to be the Pharisee. Everyone knows that the Pharisees are the "bad guys" in the NT. Through years of reading scripture, we have been conditioned to automatically distrust what the Pharisees say and to immediately assume they are bad people with bad intentions. If I could boil down the character of the typical Pharisee into a word it would either be "self-righteous" or "judgmental." And so it would be easy to read this passage with these same expectations.

Instead, however, I am going to ask you to do the unnatural. I want you to empathize with the Pharisee. I want you to become the Pharisee, to use his logic, to feel his frustrations, and to encounter the world with his perception of reality. In order to do this, there are a two things I want you to know about Pharisees in the ancient world.

1. They are good people. That is to say, they do a lot of good works. In fact, I'd venture to say that their piety and zeal for right-living surpasses 90% of the people in this room. These are the people who are always going to help the little old lady across the busy highway. These are the people who will actually keep their Lenten promises, who will do the chart positions that no one else wants to do, and they would certainly stay after the service today to help set up for VBS – hint, hint.

Above all else they value holiness as defined by the Torah. And believe me, they knew their Bible. They strived to please God by upholding the Levitical codes—eating the right foods and abstaining from the wrong foods, resting on the holy days, circumcising their children on the eighth day, abstaining from any practices that would make one ritually impure. They read their Bibles, and they read them closely, and they tried to live lives pleasing to God.

2. Pharisees, and Jews in general, often had peculiar eating habits. If you've ever read the book of Leviticus . . . I probably shouldn't assume you've read Leviticus . . . but if you have, you know that the Torah has quite a lot to say about food in general. Because of this, one could not be cautious enough not only about *what* one ate and drank but also about *who* one ate and drank with. To eat and drink with sinners is to invite impurity and, therefore, unholiness upon

oneself. And this, of course, conflicts with the first thing I told you about Pharisees: their prime objective is holiness.

Perhaps you remember the story in Galatians where Peter had been eating with Gentiles until a group called the “circumcision party” came to town, at which time Peter stopped eating with the Gentiles. Why did he stop? Because of exactly what I’ve been telling you . . . It is not just *what* Jews ate, but *with whom* they ate that was important, and Peter slipped back into this old way of thinking under considerable peer pressure.

With these two things in mind, desire for holiness and peculiar eating habits, I want you to now become the Pharisee as I read the passage one more time. . . Again, feel free to close your eyes. Take yourself to first-century Galilee. Smell its smells. Taste its tastes. Envision your surroundings. Again, you have just heard reports that this man, Jesus, healed a young man. You are interested to know a little more about this man, for people are calling him a prophet (7:16).

Luke 7:36-50 One day you asked Jesus to eat with you, and he went into your house and took his place at the table. And behold, a woman of the city, who was a sinner, when she learned that Jesus was reclining at table in your 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 you saw this, you said to yourself, “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 answered and said to you, “Simon, I have something to say to you.” “Teacher,” you said, “speak.”

“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?” You answered, “The one, I suppose, for whom he cancelled the larger debt.” And Jesus said to you, “You have judged rightly.”

Then turning toward the woman Jesus said to you, “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 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 are many, are forgiven- for she loved much. But the one who is forgiven little, loves little.” And Jesus 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 Jesus again said to the woman, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.”

(BREAK) So how did *that* feel? If we’re being honest, you might admit that the Pharisee’s response was not only natural, but it was exactly how you might respond if you were a Pharisee living in the first-century. Seriously. A “sinner” – which is quite likely a reference to a

prostitute – walks into your home uninvited, lets her hair down, and begins kissing the feet of a guest in your home while pouring ointment on them, ointment she likely had as one of the tools of her trade. Wouldn't you find this to be more than a little inappropriate?

So when our Pharisee friend says to himself, "If Jesus were a prophet, he would realize who is touching him," he has every reason to think this, first, because the whole scene is "inappropriate," and second, because Jesus is breaking every food law in the book by allowing this "sinner" to touch him while they are at the table. Remember, if you're a good Jew, you don't eat with sinners. And Jesus isn't just eating with a sinner, he is eating while being bathed by a sinner whose lips are all over him.

So in one sense, it is hard to blame the Pharisee for responding as he does. He is responding with *propriety*—the same propriety most of us would have responded with. The woman is breaking every social convention in the book, Jesus is allowing it, and the Pharisee has no categories with which to make sense of this scene other than to assume that Jesus CAN'T be a prophet—even though he knows just yesterday he raised a man from the dead.

And this gets us to the heart of this passage. In it we have a collision of two drastically different worlds. The world of the sinful woman is one that we're all in, to one degree or another. And the world of the Pharisee is one of propriety, of adhering to social norms, a world we also live in regularly. The crux, I believe, can be found in one small line from the passage; a line that could easily be a throw-away sentence if you're not careful. It is when Jesus looks at the woman and speaks to the Pharisee, and asks him, "Do.you.see.this.woman?" The answer, of course, is no. All he is able to see is a sinner who has compromised the holiness of his guest and threatens his own personal holiness. He perceives her acts to be inappropriate. He doesn't have eyes to see.

But in this moment, as Jesus looks into the eyes of the woman and begins speaking to the Pharisee, Jesus is capable of seeing and speaking to both worlds. His vision is large. He sees the woman. He sees in her what the Pharisee is unable to see. . . . Beauty.

Also, the parable Jesus tells acts to shrink the distance between the two worlds. Jesus explains that the woman is not altogether different than the Pharisee, for they both have a debt they owe. It is merely a matter of degree.

When the Pharisee looks at the sinful woman, he should be seeing his own debt and his own sin. Sinners are like mirrors. They reflect the dirt and ugliness that we all have within. They remind us of our brokenness and our own sinfulness. And for those of us who are "good people" like the Pharisees, this challenges the image that we try to portray to the world.

The degree to which one recognizes one's weakness is the degree to which one is able to be loved by God and to love others.

This story ends abruptly. Luke doesn't tell us how the Pharisee responds. Does he go away angry as Pharisees so often do in the gospels? Or does he recognize that he too has a debt that has been paid? And does he come to a place where he sees Jesus' act as the righteous thing to do? Or does he convince himself that Jesus was unrighteous and acted with impropriety? Most importantly, is his vision of the world broadened in such a way that he is able to see himself in the sinner?

May we ponder these questions as Pharisees and sinners alike. And when you hear Jesus say, "You are forgiven," may you know the depth of his love and grace.