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## Love Enough

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Luke 7:36-50

*[A Sinful Woman Forgiven]*

<sup>36</sup> 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. <sup>37</sup> 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. <sup>38</sup> 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.

<sup>39</sup> 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." <sup>40</sup> Jesus spoke up and said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." "Teacher," he replied, "speak." <sup>41</sup> "A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. <sup>42</sup> When they could not pay, he canceled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?" <sup>43</sup> Simon answered, "I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt." And Jesus said to him, "You have judged rightly."

<sup>44</sup> 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. <sup>45</sup> You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. <sup>46</sup> You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. <sup>47</sup> 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." <sup>48</sup> Then he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." <sup>49</sup> But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?" <sup>50</sup> And he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

Every time I read this story I see another woman arriving at some sacred space, having been summoned to that place and time by something greater than herself, to deliver something she cannot offer with words. Only tears. And expensive perfume. And every shred of her dignity.

She is well aware of the humiliation through which she must pass to obey this summons, this *calling* – the humiliation exceeded only by the deeper grief of keeping this calling secret, of staying away, of not bothering anybody for one more day. Because in this story, I also see a group of men very familiar to me: men who consider themselves in charge of how their religion shall function, *and what sort of people* shall be welcome, and

what the words of its language shall mean. Words like *prophet*, and *worship*, and *forgiveness*, and *faith*. Men who assume themselves to be judge and jury – of her presence, of her past, of her personhood, and of her purpose in that place and time.

Luke presents her as having been summoned there, by some previous encounter with Jesus that none but Jesus are given to know. She's come to deliver something – something, I propose, the Lord himself conceived in her. A calling? A gift? Given to her to give back to him, and in turn to the church, to us. That which later in the text Jesus names *love*. But rather than joyful anticipation, the room – her delivery room! – is filled with suspicion. With slanderers, instead of brothers.

If this makes you uncomfortable, that's okay. It's an uncomfortable story. Imagine a room where everything you are thinking was captioning on the screen in front right now.

Had Simon kept HIS mind on HIS own business, instead of the woman's, Jesus might not have called him out. But he didn't, so Jesus did. And she delivered all the same. Because to the Lord, her calling mattered more than whether or not those men were uncomfortable.

It seems so long ago, until I read this story again, and I'm right back there again: a 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30-year-old, human-Christian-female. Pregnant as could be – but not with a baby. With a calling for which, at the time, I could barely find any words. Called to preach: those were the words I could not muster. Listening – silently mostly – to men talking; discussing, with the seriousness of a National Security Council, whether or not I was, in fact, *called to pastoral ministry*. Men both *for* and *against* the very idea of it. Discussing it not in terms of *competency* or *authenticity*, but *strategy* and *risk*. As if my call was an occasion for battle rather than celebration.

In the years since, I've learned lots of things. One: there are far more men *for the idea of it* than the reality of it. And: I can laugh about it now, now that I see they may as well have been discussing whether or not a woman in labor *was, in fact, pregnant or not*.

In our story, Jesus declared the woman “saved!” and not a soul rejoiced. Instead, they were nervous, murmuring to themselves about what it could possibly mean. For her part, the woman never says a word. Which is not to say she doesn't communicate. She gets on the floor near Jesus' feet, begins rubbing oil into his feet – and weeping. She takes down her hair to use as the towel for wiping the tears which are soaking his feet.

By first-century, Near-Eastern social standards, hers was extremely inappropriate public behavior. Just as it is extremely inappropriate, 21<sup>st</sup>-century, Western public behavior. Even at a Kelley School of Business party, most people would be saying, “Yeah, we have to go now.” I can muster a sliver of sympathy for Simon. This is happening in his dining room! He has other guests! A woman, apparently known by at least some of the men

there, is on the floor, near this possible prophet Jesus. Watch Jesus multi-task: a story with a quiz after – while he’s having his feet done.

*“Which debtor loved the creditor more?” Can’t you just see Simon sweating and trying so hard NOT to look at the woman? “Uh, I guess the one for whom he cancelled the greater debt.” “Right!” Jesus says, then turns to the woman. I imagine her wiping her face, trying to get her hair tied up again, NOT looking at the others; him, so full of love for her – and then turning back to Simon, “You know all the answers, Simon, and yet you know nothing at all of how to live in this world; how to live in your own house; how to live inside the very faith in which you claim expertise.”*

And then, how I love what Jesus does here: He takes what she’s done – what was awkward, embarrassing, seemingly inappropriate to the world, but exactly right between Jesus and her – and He blesses it! He transfigures it into the shimmering, holy, precious gift of love it was when He first gave it to her.

For HER benefit, He explains to Simon: *you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair.* <sup>45</sup> *You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet.* <sup>46</sup> *You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment.* <sup>47</sup> *Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love.*

Jesus won’t polish her past. *Her sins were many – they are all forgiven.* The math is simple: many sins + complete forgiveness = much love. So much love!

Love enough to carry the gospel to the places the gospel needs to go, whether or not SHE herself is welcome. Love enough to know that what she brings to the Lord is not subject to the standards of this world. Love enough to remember that men (and women) are usually meanest and most critical when they are afraid: afraid of scarcity; afraid of conflict; afraid of change.

And now Simon is the silent one. Not only not talking – Not Thinking. Or at least, nothing the Lord calls him on. See, as much as I get her, I’m not 28 any more. I’m more like him than her. As much as Simon was then, I am more *religious establishment* than not. I worry about *the church’s future*. You know what *worry* is: it’s *fear-light*. And *fear-light* is still fear.

And *fear* is not my business. Not mine. Not yours.

OUR business is to watch for the Spirit of God, who is always and forever struggling to be born anew among us, sometimes in ways that are new to our eyes and our ears, that look or sound strange to us – awkward, maybe even inappropriate. And this text reminds me that when I’m thinking those thoughts, those thoughts are not my own. They might as well be my prayers – for the way they straight up confess the work God still has to do in me.

If what Simon **thought** was, *“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,”* then maybe what Simon was **praying** (maybe what the Lord was hearing) was - *“Dang, I was really hoping you were going to be on my side. Rome is killing us. The Temple is so corrupt. We need so much help – I need so much help – and SHE’S what you care about?”*

If I can adjust my heart just a little, turn up the grace just a little, you know what I hear? I hear that as softly and tenderly as Jesus spoke to the woman, He also spoke to Simon. And I can see that when He told her she could go, HE stayed with Simon. The others *mumbled*, or maybe they *prayed*. Maybe it just depends on who’s listening. Jesus did stay.

We know the woman became a disciple. I like thinking Simon did too – eventually. That Jesus was as gentle and merciful with his judgy, critical, sexist self as He was to the woman trading in her sins. Both of them learning to love Him, as He first loved them.

Would you pray with me?