

How Deep Is Your Love?

Luke 7:36-8:3

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Georgetown Presbyterian Church
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Have you ever had one of those gatherings when you wonder how someone got in? You know what I'm talking about—a party or some kind of function, and you see someone who obviously doesn't fit in. It makes things a bit awkward.

I'm reminded of the time when the pastor announced at the beginning of the church service that there would be a brief meeting of the board immediately following the service. And so after the pastor had pronounced the benediction and greeted a few of his parishioners, he went over to the room where the board members were waiting. Only, there was a stranger who had also come into the room. Everybody looked uncomfortably at each other, no one wanting to offend the visitor. Finally, the pastor introduced himself to the man, and then he said, "You do understand that this is a meeting of the board, don't you?"

"Yes sir," said the young man. "And after that sermon, I'm about as bored as anyone can get!"

That's why I never call a board meeting on Sunday mornings!

But in all seriousness, haven't you gone to a gathering, and somebody there has stuck out like a sore thumb? You wonder how that person ever got in, in the first place. In the story from Luke's gospel, I suspect that there was a collective gasp as the unnamed sinful woman crashed the dinner party at Simon the Pharisee's house that evening. It doesn't take much for us to imagine Simon's dismay as the situation unfolds, because most of us have sat in his seat.

But you know and I know that the story is not about social graces and etiquette. It's a story about two people and Jesus. It's a story of contrasts between the unnamed woman, and Simon the Pharisee, two very different people with completely different responses to Jesus.

On the one hand we have this "sinful woman," a person of obvious ill repute, though no specific sin is mentioned. Never at a lack for speculation, most people have concluded that the woman was a prostitute or an adulteress, perhaps because those are spectacular and attention-getting sins. But the truth is we don't really know. All we know is that this woman had a reputation of being a sinful woman, and her appearance at Simon's party for Jesus was not a welcome one.

And this woman takes a costly flask of ointment and mingles it with her tears to wash Jesus' feet. The woman is extravagant and profuse in her expression of love for Jesus.

Contrary to what his host expected, Jesus does not push the woman away. Instead he welcomes her and he assures her that she has found acceptance and forgiveness in the eyes of God. Paul Tillich rightly points out that Jesus' assurance of the woman's forgiveness in no way diminishes the serious nature of her sinfulness. Jesus does nothing to remove her personal responsibility.

On the other hand there is Simon the Pharisee. He is a righteous man, presumably an upstanding citizen in the community. Simon is likely one who publicly calls for high moral standards for all people. Simon would be the kind of person who points out the ways that society in general is falling apart. In his own life Simon has probably sought to align his actions with what he knows to be right, and he has invested a good deal of personal effort into making sure he does not do that which is wrong.

Even though in this story Jesus criticizes Simon, the truth is we ought not be too quick to condemn everything about the Pharisees. In fact, we need good moral upstanding leaders in our world. In at least some sense the world could use more people like Simon, people who seek to live their lives according to high standards of righteousness. So it's not necessarily the righteous way of living that Jesus criticizes in this story.

What Jesus does criticize is what is missing from Simon's life, and that would be any evidence of love. It was the custom for the host of a dinner to greet the guests with a welcoming kiss on the cheek, and to anoint their heads with oil, and to provide for the washing of the guests' feet. Simon did none of these things for Jesus, while the unnamed sinful woman did all of these things for Jesus.

Why the big difference? Why would the righteous man Simon fail so miserably in demonstrating even the most simple evidence of love and hospitality, and a sinful woman who had no great moral standing far exceed Simon in her demonstration of love? What is it that makes the woman love so deeply, while Simon does not love at all?

Part of the difference must come in the manner by which each person believes himself or herself to be welcome and accepted by God. For Simon, his sense of acceptance before God comes in the way that he has lived his life—he has been a good man, and he is a law-abiding righteous person. For the woman, however, her own sense of welcome and acceptance before God comes by the assurance of forgiveness of the woman's sins.

And it is the woman's perspective that Jesus honors. It is forgiveness that draws us to respond to God with love and adoration. Jesus helps us understand this truth by telling a parable about two people who are forgiven debts. One debt is rather small and insignificant, while another debt is enormous and unrepayable. The irony is that it is Simon himself who concludes that the one who is forgiven more will love more.

The key, then, to a deeper love of God, is to realize just how much we've been forgiven. The woman had no problem realizing just how great was her forgiveness, because she had been told in no uncertain terms just how great and despicable was her sinfulness.

But Simon couldn't see beyond his own righteousness. Simon could only see that he was far superior to people like the sinful woman, and so he was blind to his own shortcomings. Simon was so focused on what he did well that he was blind to his failures.

Sometimes we fall into that trap. Sometimes we build our own selves up by taking note of the failures of others around us. It is easier for us to shine the light on the weaknesses of others than to turn the mirror on ourselves.

When Will Willimon was dean of the chapel at Duke University, he was dared by a student to invite Jerry Falwell to come and speak on campus. So Willimon took the student up on his dare, much to the

protest of faculty and students. When the time came for Falwell to speak, he was greeted with boos and hisses from the audience.

The speech itself was non-memorable, non-offensive. But Willimon knew that if any controversy would erupt, it would come from the question-and-answer session that would follow the speech. The first question was confrontational. “You preach hatred,” declared a young woman from the audience. “How many African Americans do you have at Liberty University?” The audience responded with cheers and applause.

Willimon recalls vividly Falwell’s response: “Young woman, you could not have asked a question that hurts me more deeply. It is my most regrettable failure. I have worked, prayed, recruited all over the country, and I regret to say that only 12 percent of our student body is African American. Now here at Duke,” Falwell continued, “your endowment is 50 times greater than ours, you have had many more years to address the issue. Do you know how many African Americans are enrolled at Duke? I’ll tell you. Six percent! I pray that the Lord will help you do better.”¹

Dead quiet in the auditorium...

Like the young student who sought to confront Jerry Falwell in his racism, like Simon the Pharisee who was quick to take note of the moral shortcomings of the sinful woman at Jesus’ feet—you and I would do well to take our eyes away from the unrighteousness of others and turn the light upon ourselves instead. Because the scripture declares that there is no difference: All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; no one is righteous, not even one.² And the truth is, God does not differentiate between types of sin or degrees or severity of sin. All sin is ugly. All sin is more than you or I can possibly cover on our own.

The key to loving God is not to take note of how good you and I are. The key to loving God is to know that God has loved us despite who you and I are. That’s what forgiveness is. Forgiveness has that “in spite of” characteristic about it. “Forgiveness means reconciliation in spite of estrangement; it means reunion in spite of hostility; it means acceptance of those who are unacceptable, and it means receiving those who are rejected.”³ You and I are sinners, there’s no getting around that. And yet God loves us and in his love he has assured us of his forgiveness. It is a love that draws us to want to love God in return. It is a love that, though we are unworthy to be given such a love, God gives it none the less; and it is a love that makes us want to grow more worthy of it through the way we live.

Michael Lindvall is the pastor of the Brick Presbyterian Church in New York City. Several years ago he began to incorporate a new practice in his work with couples before their wedding. Several weeks before the wedding, he asks the couple to write each other love letters. They are to write privately, without letting the other see what they are writing. They are to seal up their letters and give them to Lindvall. Lindvall then asks for permission to quote excerpts from the letters at the wedding.

There was a couple who wrote a pair of unforgettable letters. The groom’s letter was especially moving. He wrote about how his wife-to-be loved him. He said his fiancée’s love was most amazing because she loved him as he was, imperfections, male foibles and all. That was amazing enough, he

¹ This story is retold in a sermon by John Buchanan, “Show Great Love,” June 17, 2007, www.fourthchurch.org

² Romans 3:23; 3:10

³ Paul Tillich, “To Whom Much Is Forgiven”, www.religion-online.org

wrote, but even more wondrous was the fact that her unconditional love had this way of pulling him to grow to be more worthy of it.⁴

How deep is your love for Jesus Christ? The answer to that question comes not in forming a list of great things that you or I have done. Rather, the answer to that question comes when we recognize how long and wide and deep is the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Only when we know how deeply we have been loved, can we know how deeply we love our Lord. Amen.

⁴ Michael Lindvall, "Scandalous Behavior," The Christian Century, June 1, 2004.