

The Church of the Pilgrimage  
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February 19, 2017

### Luke 7:36-50

When one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him, he went to the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table. A woman in that town who lived a sinful life learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's house, so she came there with an alabaster jar of perfume. As she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them. When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is—that she is a sinner." Jesus answered him, "Simon, I have something to tell you." "Tell me, teacher," he said. "Two people owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he forgave the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?" Simon replied, "I suppose the one who had the bigger debt forgiven." "You have judged correctly," Jesus said. Then he turned toward the woman and said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet. Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—as her great love has shown. But whoever has been forgiven little loves little." Then Jesus said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." The other guests began to say among themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?" Jesus said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

### **The Gift**

This week while driving around town I heard a brief clip on NPR about a door to door poet in the UK. Rowan McCabe is his name, and he knocks on people's doors, asking to talk with them, just for a minute, maybe a minute and ten seconds he'll say. For those who are willing, for those who will keep their door open he asks them what concerns them, what they think about a lot. He listens, takes a few notes then, some time later, he returns poem in hand, delivered once again on the doorstep.

In one neighborhood, a man opened up and said "Immigrants' "I am concerned about all the immigrants in this country" he said, with a not too tender tone in his voice. Two doors down lived a man who was gay, who had recently come out of the closet and shared with the poet something of his life. The clip didn't share what poem the poet wrote for the man displeased about immigration but it did share Rowan McCabe delivering his poem to the man who had let the world know a little more about himself. When the poem was delivered, the man, the neighbor said "That was a really important moment for me. Kind of summed up my struggle, my life."

I wonder what motivates a person to do this – to go door to door, to risk having doors slammed in your face I wonder what motivates a person to speak to total strangers for such a short time, to engage in such deep listening and then to return to offer them something, this craft, these words, this image or turn of the phrase? What would make a person, for no money at all, give their time and energy, their finely tuned thoughtfulness in this way? The piece didn't say. Only that somewhere, in some cities, towns, and villages of the UK, there is a man named Rowan McCabe doing this.

Which leads us to this story, the story today of the woman wiping Jesus feet with her hair, anointing his feet with oil and her tears. What motivated her to such a strange act? Why did she do what she did?

We don't know much about the woman at all. Though John in his story says the woman was Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, here in Luke, as in Mark and Matthew, the woman is unnamed. And all we know is what the Pharisees point out, that this woman is known to be a sinner, leaving us to wonder if she was perhaps living with a man not her husband, or engaged in prostitution to be able to live, to feed herself. Commentators say she likely came planning to anoint Jesus head, a common hospitality practice in Jesus day, a way of showing honor to guests, though sometimes a host would also anoint a person's feet, feet being tired and worn and dusty in the days when people walked nearly everywhere.

But again why? Why this act? Why did she who was not the host of the gathering enter a dinner already in motion, uninvited, to wash Jesus feet with her hair and her tears?

This week at a church discussion of a book on civil rights, Paul Sinn, Reverend Paul Sinn, said something very wise. "Everyone," Paul said, "has a back story. There are things that happened, things that were done for people and to people, that shape who they are, and what motivates them to do what they do in their life." We don't know the back story of this woman. We only know she was labeled a sinner. We don't know if she knew Jesus well, or if she had simply heard about him from others. Maybe he healed someone she cared deeply about. Maybe she had once observed him relating so kindly, so tenderly, to others deemed "sinner" – someone like the tax collector Zacchaeus, or the woman taken in adultery, the one the crowd was going to stone. Maybe her back story is that from afar this woman saw in Jesus a kindness, a mercy, an openness she had simply never experienced in one known to be religious before.

Or maybe Jesus really did know her. Maybe he had once spoken kindly to her, affirmed her, looked upon her with love where others had only looked upon her with scorn.

Recently my husband and I watched a movie at home a Spanish film called Corazon de Leon, or Heart of a Lion. The significance of the title was the lead man, a most

beautiful woman's love interest, who happened to be an adult man who was four and half feet tall. He was funny, smart, handsome and very small. You didn't know much about his earlier life – he had an ex-wife, a son, was an architect of considerable reknown but the backstory seemed to be that all his life people had looked upon him as different. How much he wanted people—or, to be honest, this one woman he loved – to see him as *him* as a person, not a person who was little.

So maybe I am reading something into the back story of this woman in our bible story today but it feels to me like where everyone else had looked at this woman askance, or with scorn, Jesus had treated her as forgiven, accepted, a person of worth, a person of dignity which was so precious to her that in response she wanted to do something to honor him. When the Pharisee, the host named Simon, began to fuss at her gift of gratitude, Jesus tells a story: "Simon" he says, "I have something to say to you" "Teacher" Simon says, "speak." "A certain creditor had two debtors, one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he cancelled the debts for both of them.

Now which of them will love him more?" And Simon, who is no dummy, says "I suppose the one for whom he cancelled the greater debt." Then Jesus makes a comparison, between the woman's act of hospitality, her outpouring of love and Simon's lack thereof. "I entered your house, and you gave me no water to wash my feet, But she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair." He says this too about a kiss, and about anointing. One commentator has said this is a story of an inconsiderate Pharisee and an attentive sinner.

Jesus compares Simon and the woman not just on hospitality but on the level of their receptivity to him, and there is a back story here for sure. Simon, you see, likely understood himself to be a person of importance. He was learned, he was someone people looked up to. And it seems like of the two – Simon and the unnamed woman - - she, the woman, was the one who accepted and grasped the importance of what Jesus had to offer – namely this acknowledging of worth, of personhood no matter what. Simon because of his own life experience, life station didn't really feel he had a need for that. Simon expected to be well received in society and therefore, by Jesus. The woman named only "a sinner" did not have those same expectations.

And that is the critical difference this story shows up. When we think we are self sufficient, or that we have arrived we miss out. When we know our own need, we are much more capable not only of receiving love, but also of showing love.

"She has shown great love" Jesus says of her.

Last night as we gave thanks before dinner I found myself thanking God for a meaningful day. It was a day that began with attending the funeral of the mother of church member Liz Campbell. There was a nice contingent there, as I mentioned earlier. I had never met Liz's mother, but the tributes to her, even the service itself, the things included there, spoke volumes about the fun, feisty, grateful, faithful person Ginny (Virginia) was. Isn't that what we hope will happen at a memorial

service – that everything that was beautiful, that was particular, that was unique, that was a gift would be held up to the light so that all who attend might breath a deep corporate thank you together? All who came to Virginia’s funeral yesterday took part in a celebration of someone who knew how to live because, like the woman in the story today, she knew how to show great love.

The day, the meaningful day, ended with a visit to my dad in the rehab facility where he is recuperating from a broken hip. I bring him a small potted azalea, from Trader Joe’s, a harbinger of spring. He takes it in his hands and smiles. “Thank you kindly” he says. When my father was a busy nuclear physicist, when he was a robust man doing research, going to conferences and delivering papers, when he had so many things to do-- mowing lawns , walking dogs, sawing down tree limbs, well, I hadn’t noticed back then this wonderful saying of his. “Thank you kindly” he says now every time someone does the least little thing for him.

Is it not part of our calling, yes, even in these fractious, chaotic times to be the grateful-for-life people God intends us to be? I am not talking about sticking our heads in the sand about trouble in our world....but haven’t each one of us received gifts each and every day? The chance to rise each morning, live one more day, the privilege of having a home and food, the opportunity to be in relationships, and this faith community, a place to reflect upon what matters and upon the gift of God’s great love?

Soon we will be entering the season of Lent. Perhaps this woman who showed great love is nudging us, prompting us to think about new ways to mark the season.

What if one of the ways we marked Lent this year was simply to think about what motivates us? What if we focused too on our own capacity to give and receive love? And what if one of the ways we marked Lent this year was to wonder, to simply wonder, about the back story behind each person we encounter?

Might these things change us, change the contours of our hearts and our world?

Amen.