

sermon-6/13/10 Newport Presbyterian Church  
“Forgiveness, Salvation, and Peace”  
Luke 7:36-8:3

Being forgiven, healed, saved, saved from ourselves, our relentless self-criticalness, our addictions, our old habits that trap us and hold us hostage, however you want to phrase it, experiencing any of that will change us. We will act differently. We will become more extravagant in our loving and our giving. We will become a whole lot less self-conscious. We will stop worrying about what others think. We will become humble, realizing being forgiven is a gift, pure and simple.

To think we don't need forgiveness, to think we are better than others who do need forgiveness, that our practicing religious rituals pleases God and protects us from having to change, all of that leads in a very different direction.

Joan Chittister put it this way. Humility is the glue that keeps us together. “Pride drives a wedge between us.” She goes on to say humility helps us see “God is not a goal to be reached; God is a presence to be recognized.” And when we recognize God is in our midst, we stop trying to measure up to what the culture expects. We are free to celebrate being in the presence of all that is holy, all that makes us whole.

Luke says if you don't believe that, let me tell you a couple of stories. Both stories concern women and Jesus. Both stories border on the scandalous, but end up being anything but scandalous if you have eyes to see and hearts to understand.

In the first story Jesus is invited to Simon's house for a banquet. Simon is a Pharisee. One commentator described Simon in Mark Twain's words. He is a “good man in the worst sense of the word.”

We know from Luke's gospel, just a few verses before this story, that the Pharisees refused to be baptized by John the Baptist. They thought they did not need this baptism of repentance. They didn't want to associate with all the riffraff, people like the woman who enters Simon's dinner party, who probably did get baptized by John and experienced God's forgiveness.

While dining with Simon, and other important guests, reclining at the low table in the courtyard visible to those who pass by, with his legs out behind him, Jesus experiences a surprising act. A woman, described here as a sinner, comes into this masculine scene and starts to wash Jesus' feet with her tears. She lets down her hair in public, something only women of ill repute did in that day, and dries his feet with her hair. She then anoints his feet with expensive ointment.

This was a shocking thing for her to do. It could have been seen as a provocative, even a sexual act. For Jesus to allow her to continue meant that he was ignoring the ritual purity laws that said he would be unclean because he let such a woman touch him. Simon was shocked. Luke tells us what he was thinking even though he did not say it aloud. As Will

Williamon said, Simon proves the old adage, “What good is religion if you can’t be judgmental?”

Jesus does not let her actions be misconstrued. He makes it very clear this was not a provocative act, but one of great love. Her love stemmed from her experiencing forgiveness. This is crucial. She did not act loving in order to be forgiven. The Greek verb being used here makes it clear her forgiveness was something she had already experienced and was continuing to experience. Because she repented and believed God was big enough to forgive even her, she could be loving and generous in stunning ways.

Jesus makes it clear she had become the hostess at this dinner, washing his feet, giving him a kiss of greeting and anointing him with oil. The literal host, the Pharisee, did not do any of the customary niceties. His false sense of superiority did not lead to grateful, loving acts, only judgment.

In the next story we see a group of women who had been healed from evil spirits and infirmities. These women ignore propriety and travel with Jesus and his disciples, paying for their upkeep out of their own funds.

This was another potential scandalous situation. What would others think about them traveling with men who weren’t their husbands. Jesus ignored what others were thinking and gratefully accepted their generosity. It is clear that generosity was a result of their experiencing healing and not vice-versa.

In both these stories actions speak louder than words. Note the sinful woman in the first story was commended for her faith. But, note as well, she said absolutely nothing in Luke’s telling of the story. She made no profession of faith. She did not say all the right words. She let her actions speak for her faith.

Richard Carlson, a professor of Biblical Studies at a Lutheran seminary in Pennsylvania sums up this text eloquently. I’ll quote him here because I can’t think of any better way to say it.

“God’s forgiveness in Jesus Christ is a scandal. It goes out to sinners regardless of their religious or social standing.. It transforms who we are, whom we understand God to be, and how we are to live our lives and utilize our resources. It touches every aspect of our existence. It seeks to generate not just an intellectual acknowledgment or a polite thank you but blubbering, messy, wholehearted, continual, gushy devotion. It is not something that we control but something that slams into our lives and takes control. It is not given to us as a result of our love but generates love in us to God and to others.”

We are all forgiven sinners in this sanctuary. May we act like it. Amen.