

June 12, 2016



## “Learning the Way of Jesus”

Sermon by Rev. Robert

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 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. 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. 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.' Jesus spoke up and said to him, 'Simon, I have something to say to you.' 'Teacher,' he replied, '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?' Simon answered, 'I suppose the one for whom he cancelled the greater debt.' And Jesus said to him, 'You have judged rightly.' Then turning towards 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. 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 were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.' Then he said to her, 'Your sins are forgiven.' But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, 'Who is this who even forgives sins?' And he said to the woman, 'Your faith has saved you; go in peace.'*

A couple weeks ago I was scrolling through social media when I stumbled upon this quote which captures the power and essence of our story this morning:

“Be like Jesus: spend enough time with sinners that you ruin your reputation with religious people.” Joshua Harris.

This morning's text is a complicated and powerful story which illustrates for us one of the foundational elements of the gospels: Jesus' relational ministry with tax collectors and sinners.

Throughout his life, in the gospel of Luke, Jesus teaches and demonstrates this for us time and time again, that his mission, his ministry, is for those we would least expect, the lowly, those on the bottom, those that we religious folks would rather exclude.

In today's story Jesus is invited to the house of Simon, a Pharisee, a man of some importance in his community, a person who is an educated religious leader, and a member of the social elite.

Jesus accepts this invitation to dine with Simon and his friends, and during this meal a woman from the city, a sinner, brings a jar of ointment to anoint Jesus' feet.

Now it may be common knowledge, but it is worth noting that feet are not the most pleasant of all body parts, especially during the time of Jesus. It was a walking culture and people's feet were dirty, calloused and worn. Therefore this woman's actions, unprompted by Jesus, must have been deeply symbolic and meaningful to her, to Jesus, and all who were there.

This moment was so moving to her that she begins to weep, her tears falling upon his feet, she uses her hair, the only thing she has, to wipe away her tears. And she kisses his feet as she anoints them with her oil.

Just take a moment to picture this scene. This is a holy, sacred, intimate moment of a person who in vulnerability is expressing her joy, her gratitude and her love.

Simon, the host, is unable to see the beauty and the grace in this moment and dismisses Jesus as a would-be prophet and this woman as a sinner.

But Jesus, ever ready to seize a teachable moment, launches into a parable of two debtors whose debts are forgiven; one whose debt was large, the second whose debt was small. In this exchange between Jesus and Simon, Jesus exposes the radical love and hospitality this woman has shown in contrast to Simon whose hospitality left something to be desired.

And then Jesus offers us this seemingly simple and yet utterly profound and challenging saying as he says in verse 47

“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.”

Jesus, in this teaching, exposes a myth that many of us still live by today. He is teaching us that the spiritual life is not about becoming perfect human beings; it's not about becoming flawless or sinless. Jesus is teaching us that the core of a spiritual life is learning to love with the love of God.

Discipleship is not about learning the proper sin-management system so that we can neatly order our lives or control the amount of exposure we have to things like weakness, powerlessness and vulnerability.

No, instead Jesus gives us this radical and challenging way of life which actually claims that all of us have an unbelievable capacity for compassion and love rooted not in our perfection but our imperfection, not in our ability to be hyper-functional, but in those moments of dysfunction, that true power, God's power is found in those moments of powerlessness which open us up to find God's grace in the midst of it all. Grace being, of course, what God does for us, that we are unable to do for ourselves.

And the key to this life and tapping into this grace and life-giving love, is the ability for us to be humble, honest and vulnerable, which ultimately is to be seen just as we are, without any pretense or ego, without any reputation or pride, to just to be you.

This story shows us the power of humility, honesty and vulnerability as this woman risks so much in order to perform such a loving act for Jesus.

She knew herself, she knew her reputation, and she knew how others saw her and perceived her. It's not hard to imagine that she carried around with her a tremendous amount of public and personal shame. We can see this reflected in the text, in that, the only title she carries is that of “sinner.”

And what a burden she carried with her, this burden of shame. Being seen by her community, by those who she lived with day in and day out, as a sinner, an outcast, as unworthy of acceptance or love. And yet, she overcomes all of this, courageously risking further exposure in order to express her gratitude for Jesus and to bless him with this gift.

We could all learn from this woman, this sinner, because she gets it. She knows what it means to be forgiven, she knows what it means to be loved, she knows what it means to live an abundant life.

Shame is a burden that we all carry in some way. The tricky thing about shame is that we sometimes confuse it, or blend it, together with guilt. They are in fact two different things.

Writer, storyteller and researcher Brene Brown in her Ted Talk on Shame, differentiates between the two in this way, she says: "Shame is a focus on self, guilt is a focus on behavior. Shame is 'I am bad.' Guilt is 'I did something bad.' How many of you, if you did something that was hurtful to me, would be willing to say, 'I'm sorry. I made a mistake?'....Guilt: I'm sorry. I made a mistake. Shame: I'm sorry. I am a mistake."

Truth is we all make mistakes. If you are like me you make a lot of mistakes. But, I'm going to go out on a limb here by make a generalization and say that all of us have already made at least one mistake already this morning, and it's not even lunch time! But none of us are a mistake. No one.

You were formed in your mother's womb by the Divine creator of all things, you are wonderfully made in the image of a merciful and loving God, a God of grace, who breathed into you the breath of life and is breathing you into existence right now.

As Frederick Buechner once said "The grace of God means something like: Here is your life. You might never have been, but you **are** because the party wouldn't have been complete without you."

The party wouldn't have been complete without **you**.

So what can we take from all of this to enhance our spiritual practice this week?

The church has an ancient prayer practice of confession, both personal and corporate. Confession seems to be little bit out of fashion in the church nowadays, especially as we have tried to be more "seeker friendly," which is code for don't be such a downer and tell people how terrible they are.

But confession isn't about shame, it's not about unworthiness, it's not about being a mistake.

No, confession is about honesty, humility and vulnerability.

Confession is an act of allowing yourself to be seen, to be exposed, to be known completely by God. Confession is letting go of all that would bind you and keep you from a life of authenticity and freedom. Confession is bringing to light that which you might actually prefer to keep in the darkness even if it's killing you; confession is refusing to live in denial about who we are and whose we are, confession liberates us from the bondage of sin.

See for far too long we've lived with this false notion handed down by really bad theology which says we are punished by God for our sin, when in actuality we are punished by our sin, not for them. Let me say that again, we are not punished by God for our sin, we are punished by sin not for them. We are punished by that shame we carry around deep within us, the part of us that says we are unlovable, we are unforgivable until we manage to fix that one thing.

It isn't until to let go of this idea: **it's up to us to save ourselves**, and it isn't until we recognize our own **powerlessness** that we are set free by God's perfect redeeming love in Jesus Christ.

By practicing confession we are given the opportunity for healing, liberation and transformation.

So this coming week let's find some way to practice this in our lives. If you are a journaler, write it down. If you are a contemplative, give yourself some place for silent confession. If you are a talker, find that spiritual mentor you trust and see if they can spare an hour, or two. And if you don't know what to do or say, pray the Lord's Prayer. Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And if you don't have it memorized take a copy of the Order of Worship home and put it up where you will see it regularly, on a mirror or underneath your iPhone, someplace where you can come back to it.

If you start to practice confession in whatever way you can it has the power to relieve you of the burden of shame. You can start to shift your thinking from I am a mistake to I make mistakes, because confession never comes without absolution. It never comes without a pronouncement of your unbelievable worthiness in the eyes of God. Confession never leaves you hanging but always draws you back to this undying truth that you are forgiven, you are always forgivable, and you don't have to do anything or fix anything to earn it.

And if you think that you have too many mistakes to count or number, consider yourself incredibly blessed because you my friend have a lot of love to share. Thanks be to God. Amen