

**November 19, 2023**  
**Thanksgiving Sunday: Luke 7:36-50**  
**Rev. Kelley Becker**

Thank-you notes. I want to be the kind of person who writes them and sends them. And I really want to be the kind of person who writes them by hand and sends them. There are seasons in life in which this is the kind of person I am. And there are seasons when it is not. I remember arguing with my kids about thank-you notes when they were young. We would have birthday parties with all their friends, and each friend would give them a gift. The rule we had was that they could play with or use the gift as soon as they wrote the thank you note for it. They would argue that they said thank you to their friend at the party, so a thank you note wasn't necessary. I would explain that sitting down and writing the note was doing something to show their gratitude, which is better and more meaningful than just saying thanks. I would remind them how much they enjoy getting mail and receiving thank-you notes from others.

I think the woman in our bible story this morning would agree with my strategy, even if it didn't work perfectly every time. Our story is from the Gospel of Luke, and it's just before the official part of the book that scholars call the travel narrative, in which the author tells his version of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem. However, even before that section, Jesus and his followers traveled from town to town, and Jesus taught, healed, and performed miracles. Today's story is found in one version or another in all four gospels. The author of Luke has set his version in Nain, a village about eight miles southeast of Nazareth in lower Galilee. This is Luke 7: 36-50.

<sup>36</sup> One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and when he went into the Pharisee's house, he reclined to dine. <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, 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 moneylender 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. 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<sup>[j]</sup> 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 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 many sins 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> But he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

The Jesus in this gospel is one who suffers with those who were outcast and excluded. He showed them compassion, which made the people with power very nervous. They wanted to keep order, and the way to do that was to be sure everyone knew their place and stayed in it. This Jesus was making them feel like their suffering mattered, which it did not to the Roman Empire and its representatives.

In the story, one of the Pharisees (the Jewish keepers of the law) invited Jesus to his home for a meal. We don't know why he did so. Maybe it was a "keep your enemies close" situation. Maybe he liked Jesus. Maybe he was just curious. Whatever, Jesus agreed to go. In this time and place, it was customary for the men to recline at the table, which is how the unnamed woman found him. Because he was reclining, the text says she stood behind him at his feet. She was crying and washed his feet with her tears. She kissed his feet, took her hair down to dry them, and then anointed his feet with the ointment from the jar. The Pharisee saw what the woman was doing, but he didn't say anything to the woman or to Jesus. The author tells us what he was thinking, though, "Who does she think she is? And who does he think he is? This woman is a sinner, and because he is letting her touch him, he must not be the prophet his followers think he is."

The woman was a "sinner," but the author never mentions exactly what her sin was. Traditional Christianity has enjoyed making this scandalous by talking about the woman's sin in terms of sexual sin, like she was a prostitute. And she may have been. We can't deny that this was an intimate and uncommon moment, but according to Jewish New Testament scholar Amy Jill Levine, a woman's loosened hair could indicate grief, gratitude, or an important plea; it need not be interpreted as erotic. I honestly think it makes more sense to imagine that the woman had encountered Jesus and/or his message outside the dinner and was so overcome with love and gratitude that she had to DO something. It wasn't enough to just say "thank you." She wanted to *show* him her gratitude, much to the Pharisee's annoyance.

I wonder if you have ever felt that way. Have you ever been so moved by gratitude that it inspired you to do something for that other person? Shortly after we started Love in a Pantry, a woman came to the church to get a few things for her family. She needed peanut butter and there wasn't any in the pantry that day. She came inside and asked me if we had any, and we didn't, but I went to the kitchen and found some designated for Lunches with Love and gave it to her. I also gave her a jar of jelly and a half a loaf of bread. She said thank you about 10 times in our short exchange. The next week, she came back and handed me two jars of peanut butter and explained that it was payday, and she had to do something to show me how thankful she was for our help.

I hadn't thought about that woman in a long time, but this week's story reminded me of her. This deep act of gratitude, the one in the story, along with a text message from a member this week, has me thinking about the ways in which we express gratitude to one another, but also to our Creator. This member shared with me that last week's words to the song "More Than Enough" frustrated her. She said she understands the idea of there being more than enough for all of us in the kin-dom of God. However, she explained, we are living in a world in which, in her words, "rivers do run dry and animals and birds become extinct." She is right. Saying "thank you" to God and singing songs about there being more than enough will not make it so. Like the woman in this story, if we are truly grateful, we must DO something.

For some of us, looking at our Thanksgiving tables this week, overflowing with food, surrounded by people we love, feeling gratitude will be easy. Some of us will even say a prayer of Thanksgiving before we eat. But we know it is not so easy for everyone. For the ones who will not have enough to eat and for the ones who will spend the day alone, we must express our gratitude by doing something. It is easy to look around at the beauty of nature and feel gratitude, to even sing songs like "For the Beauty of the Earth." But feeling thankful and singing and talking about how thankful we are is not enough. If we are truly thankful, the way to demonstrate that is to actually DO something.

The world God dreams about is the world we sing about when we sing the words "more than enough." But if we want that world to come to be, we must DO something...anything. One way to study the Bible is to try to find ourselves in the story, asking, "Who in the story do I relate to?" And truthfully, this week, I found myself in the character of the Pharisee. Yeah, I'm the one who neglected to wash Jesus' feet. I am the one who didn't show over-the-top hospitality by anointing his head or his feet. And I am the one who would be quietly critical of the one who was so grateful to finally be seen, for someone to say she mattered, that she wept and she cared for him. She did something.

This Thanksgiving holiday we celebrate this week has a complex history. It is a morally mixed amalgam of different kinds of gratitude: for good harvest, for safe passage, for colonial conquest, for military victory. Remembering this history of cross-cultural encounter and conflict, we may give thanks for the dazzling diversity of this land, including and especially Native American communities. Giving thanks in this way, our gratitude can spur us to reach out and work together to create a more just and equitable world. Gratitude is a vital force in the world, a profoundly dignifying act that builds relationships, communities, and healthy human hearts. These things don't happen if all we do is talk about being thankful. There is a song sung by Alison Krauss called "When You Say Nothing at All." The chorus of the song ends with, "You say it best when you say nothing at all. I am not suggesting that we don't say "thank you" when we are thankful. But there has to be more.

There is a tradition in many families to go around the table and name something they are grateful for before diving into the meal. What if we tweaked that tradition a little by encouraging our guests to share not only what they are grateful for, but how they plan to show their gratitude in the coming year? Like this: I am grateful for this food, so I am going to make a meal for our neighbor who is recovering from surgery. I am grateful for my family and friends, so I am going to make time to visit my friend who is not feeling the holidays this year. I am grateful for running water, so I am going to conserve it by turning the water off while I suds up my hair and body in the shower. I am grateful for the pets I have loved and get to love, so I am going to donate food to the shelter. I am grateful for the creatures with which I share this earth, so I am going to plant native plants that attract birds and bees and stop putting chemicals on my lawn. Let's not just talk about it. This Thanksgiving let's make gratitude an action word. Live your gratitude. DO something. Amen.