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Luke 7:36-50
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As a middle schooler, I found that the middle school cafeteria was a pretty cruel place to be. When I was in elementary school, we filed into the cafeteria, got our lunch trays, and sat down next to the person who was in front of us in line. We didn't get to choose who we sat by. But in middle school, there was no line to the cafeteria, we just went to lunch and sat wherever. I always sat with my bestie and that's really all I cared about.

Almost every day someone would come and ask if they could sit at our table and we always said yes because we were happy as long as we were together. Other people felt differently. I remember almost every day watching a boy walk from table to table asking if he could sit down and the students at various tables telling him no. I also remember the look of relief on his face when he came to our table and we said yes.

Don't misunderstand... my friend and I were not pillars of inclusion. We just didn't see the school lunch table as our space to control. Of course, the right thing to do would have been to get up from the table and invite the boy to sit at our table. However, in the book of my life, my middle school years should be titled, "My Clueless Era," because I was generally clueless about what other people were going through and how my actions or inactions impacted them.

Today's story from Luke is a table story too. Let's hope the characters in this story do better than I did in middle school. This is Luke 7:36-50.

36 One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and when he went into the Pharisee's house he reclined to dine. 37 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. 38 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. 39 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." 40 Jesus spoke up and said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." "Teacher," he replied, "speak." 41 "A certain moneylender had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. 42 When they could not pay, he canceled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?" 43 Simon answered, "I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt." And Jesus said to him, "You have judged rightly." 44 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 has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. 45 You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. 46 You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. 47 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.” 48 Then he said to her, “Your sins are forgiven.” 49 But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, “Who is this who even forgives sins?” 50 But he said to the woman, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.”

This story appears in all four of the gospels, but each gospel author renders their story differently. The story here, in the Gospel of Luke, and how the author uses it makes it an outlier. As is often the case in biblical or any scholarship, not all scholars agree. Most scholars do agree that all the accounts stem from the same event. The Gospel of Mark is the earliest, so it is likely the author of Mark crafted his story first and the others used his story as a jumping-off point for theirs. In this case, the differences between the ways the authors tell this story are more telling than their similarities.

In the gospels of Mark and Matthew, an anonymous woman anointed Jesus on the head just before the Passion narrative. In their stories, some bystanders objected, but Jesus defended her action as anointing his body beforehand for burial. The story took place in Bethany, in the house of Simon who had leprosy. In the Gospel of John, the setting was also in Bethany, but in the home of Lazarus. Lazarus’ sister, Mary, anointed Jesus’ feet. The one who objected was Judas. Jesus defended Mary’s purchase of the costly ointment “that she may keep it for the day of my burial.” In all three stories, the woman, regardless of her identity, was prophetic because the authors associated her actions with Jesus’ future burial. The woman understood what was happening in the present, could foresee what would happen in the future, and acted accordingly.

The author of Luke, bless his heart, deliberately eliminated the image of a woman performing a prophetic action. You may remember that early in this sermon series I mentioned that the Gospel of Luke has the reputation of being woman-friendly because the author told the stories of women. I said at the time that we would run into examples of how the author told the women’s stories in ways that diminished their contributions. This story is a good example of that. New Testament scholar, Amy-Jill Levine writes that the author of Luke has “rewritten the account in Matthew and Mark, and, in doing so, recasts the woman into a sinner and not one who recognizes [that Jesus’ death was imminent].” And then the author of John, assuming he was aware of the stories told in the other three gospels, attempts to “control the story by combining the Passion setting with the anointing of the feet and ensuring that the woman in the story is Mary the sister of Martha.”¹ The differences in these stories help us see how the gospel authors thought about the place of women in Jesus’ ministry. To be clear, they all thought they had a *place*, but the author of Luke very much wanted them to stay “in their place.”

¹ Levine, Amy-Jill and Ben Witherington III, *The Gospel of Luke: New Cambridge Bible Commentary*, (Cambridge University Press: New York), 210.

In addition to how women are portrayed in these stories, the purpose of the stories within each narrative is also an important difference. Matthew, Mark, and John all use the story to foreshadow Jesus' death. The author of Luke uses it to talk about hospitality and forgiveness and to do so, he draws a clear distinction between the actions of the Pharisee who was the host, and the actions of the unnamed woman who poured out her love for Jesus.

So, who was the unnamed woman?

How many of you have heard this story before today? If you have heard it, who were you taught the woman was?

Traditional Christianity taught some of us that the woman was Mary Magdalene. I polled a few people this week and almost all of us, regardless of the kind of church we grew up in, were taught that the woman in this story was Mary Magdalene and that she was a prostitute. Mary Magdalene is first mentioned at the beginning of chapter 8, which is probably one reason she has been associated with our story at the end of chapter 7.

Scholars who focus on this woman as a prostitute tend to focus on her "...being known in the city, her loosened hair, her expensive alabaster flask of ointment, and her sensual way of touching Jesus' feet."² Except, the author of Luke doesn't say the woman's sins were sexual and there are other explanations for the details in this passage that some say point to her "sexual looseness." The mention of her being from the city could simply reflect Luke's preference for cities. He mentions cities sixteen times in this gospel. Unbound hair isn't just for loose women. It was customary for unmarried women and some women loosened their hair as an expression of grief or even gratitude, which makes some sense in the context of this story. I could go on, but you see what I mean. We muddy this story and diminish this woman when we read things into it that are just not there.

We come closer to understanding what the author was trying to do with the story when we see this woman as Jesus saw her and not so much how traditional Christianity has viewed her or how Simon the Pharisee saw her. We don't have to look any further than how Bible editors title this passage to see how traditional Christianity sees this woman. Keeping in mind that there are no titles in the original Greek texts, here are some of the ways this story is titled:

New American Bible translation—"The Pardon of a Sinful Woman"

New Jerusalem Bible—"The Woman Who Was a Sinner."

New Revised Standard Version—"A Sinful Woman Forgiven"

Even the title of the artwork on the screen is "Jesus Absolves the Penitent Sinner."

All of these titles keep the reader's view firmly fixed on the woman's sin.

But, here's the thing, the story isn't about her sin. It is about her love. The title ought to be "A Woman Who Showed Great Love." And of course, Simon saw nothing more than

² Reid, Barbara E. and Shelly Matthews, *Luke 1-9: Wisdom Commentary*, (Liturgical Press: Collegeville, MN, 2021), 240.

a sinner. Because that's all he saw, he was convinced Jesus was not a prophet or he wouldn't have allowed the woman to touch him. Jesus, on the other hand, saw at his feet a woman freed from her mistakes, whose gestures of extravagant love and hospitality were born of the forgiveness she received.

The author of Luke, who loved a good table story, used this opportunity to contrast the inhospitality of the host (the one who should have been hospitable) with the hospitality of an uninvited guest. The host did not even offer Jesus water to wash his feet nor did he properly greet him with a kiss. The woman who was labeled sinful didn't just offer him water, she washed his feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. She kissed his feet and anointed them with precious ointment. The author would like us to look at this woman's over-the-top love as a direct response to the forgiveness she received prior to this scene. The author would like us to respond similarly when we experience forgiveness. I could end this sermon by talking about forgiveness and how we respond to forgiveness. There will be other opportunities to do that though.

There is something else in this story for us today though. It seems like a detail too small to mention really, but details matter. Notice that the only reason we know what Simon thought of the woman is that the narrator told us what he was thinking, "...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.'" The author of Luke is the only gospel author who uses inner monologue to tell this particular story. In Mark, the onlookers grumble among themselves, but not directly to Jesus. In Matthew, the disciples object openly, and in John, Judas voices his concerns to Jesus. Luke's version of the story not only highlights Simon's unspoken thoughts it highlights Jesus' ability to perceive them. And for Luke, this story fulfills Simeon's prophecy in chapter 2 in which he pronounced over the infant Jesus, "...the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed."

Internal monologue is common in today's literature, but in ancient literature, it wasn't so. When it was used, it was often during a moment of crisis in the story when the hero was experiencing intense internal conflict. Luke uses internal monologue in much the same way, except Luke's thinkers are not heroes. We never read about *Jesus* thinking to himself. Instead, the characters in Luke's narrative who think to themselves generally embody self-centeredness or foolishness. Biblical scholar Michal Beth Dinkler writes, "For Luke, as well as for much of the ancient world, thinking to oneself is a negative indication: it suggests someone would be ashamed to speak openly..."³ In this story, Simon has a choice between two opposing views of Jesus' identity. Either Jesus was a prophet or he wasn't. And based on the fact that he didn't say anything directly to Jesus, he didn't want to talk about it. Jesus responded to Simon's inner

³ Dinkler, Michal Beth, "The Thoughts of Many Hearts Shall be Revealed: Listening in on Lukan Interior Monologues, JBL 134.2 (2015), 373-99.

monologue and we, as the readers, are left wondering if Jesus' response did anything to change Simon's mind.

From a literary standpoint, giving voice to a character's inner thoughts encourages the reader to ask themselves, "What would I do in this situation? What would I say in my own heart?" And I wonder, does it matter? Does the voice in our head impact us? Yes. Our self-talk impacts our mental health, self-worth, and ultimately, it affects how we treat ourselves. Likewise, what we think about other people, even if we never voice it, impacts how we treat them.

In an online article for *Psychology Today*, Dr. Jennice Vilhauer, Emory University's Director of the Adult Outpatient Psychotherapy program wrote about how what we think becomes what we believe and what we believe becomes reality. She wrote, "Your thoughts, if you think them over and over, and assign truth to them, become beliefs. Beliefs create a cognitive lens through which you interpret the events of your world, and this lens serves as a selective filter through which you sift the environment for evidence that matches up with what you believe to be true...We act in ways likely to bring about what we believe is true. That is the very definition of creating your reality."⁴ We are seeing the results of this in dangerous ways in our nation right now. Politicians benefit from the seeds of distrust they have planted about science, government employees, immigrants, the Queer Community, strong women, and people who are not the right kind of Christian, and the right skin color, or culture.

So I wondered, how do we begin to fix this? As with most things, dear ones, it must start with the person we face in the mirror every day. As I thought about that this week, I was reminded of the Buddhist Metta Prayer and I reflected a bit on prayer. When I was a child, I learned that prayer is simply talking to God. I was told I could say anything to God because, after all, God knows what I am thinking anyway. To be clear, even as I child, I did not say just anything to God. I always kind of thought that I shouldn't say unkind things about other people to God because if God really does love all of us like a parent loves a child, I didn't want to say something negative about God's child to God.

Over the years, I've come to the idea that prayer is more about remembering that none of us are alone than it is about unloading all my garbage to the Mystery of the Universe or listing all the things I want. If I say I will pray for you, know that you are not alone in whatever you have asked me to pray about. Regardless of what you believe about God or prayer, I think the words of the Metta Prayer (which we prayed together earlier) are good points of reflection and meditation and I have started using them not only as I pray for other people, but to redirect my negative thoughts about situations and people. There is nothing magical about these words and there are other

⁴ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/living-forward/202009/how-your-thinking-creates-your-reality>, accessed 2/21/25.

versions of this prayer, but here is what I've been using and I know there are others in the congregation who have been doing the same for a long time.

May I be peaceful.

May I be happy.

May I be safe.

May I awaken to the light of my true nature.

May I be free.

May all beings be peaceful.

May all beings be happy.

May all beings be safe.

May all beings awaken to the light of their true nature.

May all beings be free from suffering.

This prayer has given me something to meditate on instead of my negative thoughts about politicians, billionaires, climate change, people who have irritated me or hurt my friends, all the ways I have failed, all the things I could have done better, and all the rest. This prayer has not kept me from action, no prayer should do that, but it has kept me from feeling helpless and hopeless when it seems like there is nothing helpful I can do.

The lessons in today's text are plentiful.

Extend hospitality to other people, not like me in my Clueless Era.

Eat with people who are different from you.

Don't allow your negative inner monologue to take over your actions.

Try to see people as Jesus saw them, even when traditional Christianity says otherwise.

Love extravagantly.

Live your life so it would be titled, "The Dear Human Being Who Showed Great Love to Everyone. Amen.