

“This Kiss” GPPC 6-12-16
Psalm 5:1-8, Luke 7:36--8:3

So Jesus was invited to a dinner party. A Pharisee named Simon invited him. You may remember that Pharisees tended to be affluent and well-educated, experts on how to follow the law and be obedient to God. In case you've forgotten, Presbyterians are now the wealthiest denomination per capita in the country, and we have the second highest level of education per capita just behind the Quakers. We're counting on some of our congregation's college students to pick up some masters degrees and doctorates to put us into first place. Just saying.

The Pharisees were affluent and educated. But usually in the New Testament a group of them, not all of them, of course, a group of them were in conflict with Jesus. And the conflict always revealed something about the nature of humanity and about the mercy of God.

Jesus was invited to a dinner party by Simon a Pharisee. Jesus arrived and sat down at the table. It was probably low to the floor, and the people around it reclined against pillows, maybe with their legs underneath them, feet sticking out behind them. Meanwhile poor people

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who lived in the area were welcome to come in and eat the leftover food after the guests were finished eating.

It reminds us of God's commands about leaving something behind from the harvest for the immigrant, the orphan, the widow, the poor. In Deuteronomy 24 God commands, "When you reap your harvest in your field and forget a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it; it shall be left for the alien, the orphan, and the widow, so that the Lord your God may bless you in all your undertakings." God also commands leaving leftovers from the harvest of the olive trees and the grape vines. And God concludes, "Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt; therefore I am commanding you to do this."

God commands mercy for the immigrant, the orphan, the widow, all who are weak and hungry that the people of God may be blessed, humbled, and remember who they were—slaves in the land of Egypt. And God commands sharing with the weak and hungry that they may come and have something to eat. Even today in many cities, nonprofits and church groups go to restaurants and grocery stores and collect food

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that otherwise would be thrown out, and then they distribute it to the hungry. This is the gospel at work, isn't it?

So it wasn't unusual that this woman showed up at the party. But then Luke says she was "a woman in the city, who was a sinner." Now a few scholars think the phrase "a woman in the city" means she was a prostitute. But most scholars don't believe that; they think her exact sin is unknown. What we *do* know is that she was "a sinner." A Bible scholar says, "A woman would have been called a sinner if she were known as a liar, a thief, a cheat, or any other type of sinner in her own right, or she might simply have been the wife of a man who was known to be immoral or the practitioner of any one of a number of professions looked down upon as the breeding ground of dishonesty." (Sharon H. Ringe, *Luke*, 108.)

So we don't know exactly what was sinful about this woman. But other people knew or thought they did. Simon knew or thought he did. The woman herself must have known. As a woman, a former prostitute, in one of Marilynne Robinson's novels says, "I got shame like a habit..." Maybe that's how this sinful woman in the city felt.

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But she heard that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's house. So she went to the dinner party herself. Apparently, she didn't come to eat leftovers. Instead, she brought an "alabaster jar of ointment." And typically you couldn't just unscrew the jar, use a little bit of ointment, and then screw the jar closed again. Instead, you had to break the neck of the jar and use all the ointment. It was expensive and extravagant.

So Luke says the woman stood behind Jesus, at his feet, crying. And she began to bathe his feet with her tears and then dry them with her hair. Then she was kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment she'd brought.

If you or I had walked by, looked into the room, and saw this happening, what would we have thought? This woman with a bad reputation washing Jesus' feet with her tears and her hair, then kissing his feet and anointing them with ointment—what would we have thought? Would we have been scandalized? Called somebody to complain? Taken a photo and put it online? Or would we have thought something else?

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Simon the Pharisee thought something. “Hah! Some prophet this Jesus is! Doesn’t even know what kind of sinful woman this is who’s touching him.”

But then Jesus, who was prophet and more than prophet, knew Simon’s thoughts and told him a parable. He said, “You’ve got two people that owe money. One owes 500 days wages. The other, 50. Both debts are forgiven. Who’s going to love the forgiver of the debt more?” And Simon said, “I suppose the one who owed more. Duh.”

And Jesus said, “Right. See this woman? Well, 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. You didn’t kiss me, but ever since I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. You didn’t anoint my head with oil, but she anointed my feet with ointment.”

As one writer puts it, “The Pharisee rudely ignores common practices of hospitality, denying the road-weary Jesus a basin with which to wash or a towel to dry his feet. This is the host’s way of saying, ‘It’s great that you stopped by to see me. I’m sorry you won’t be staying long.’” (Verlee A. Copeland in *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 3*, 143.)

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But at every point the sinful woman took the normal hospitality expectations and blew them away. Not just water for Jesus' feet but tears. Not just a towel but her own hair. Not just a kiss on the cheek but kissing his feet. Not just anointing his head but anointing his feet. Are we starting to see what this woman did and why she did it?

Simon the Pharisee couldn't see it. All he saw was a man he thought was a failed prophet and a sinful woman to be judged and looked down upon. And once we see ourselves as superior and look down upon another human being, especially when we have power, it's only a small step from there to contempt and abuse. As we note the prevalence of sexual violence in our world and on our college campuses, isn't it rooted in the perpetrator's inability to see the other person as having immeasurable worth as a child of God and not just an object for the perpetrator's self-gratification? Isn't it essential that our children be taught the equality of *all* people rooted in our creation as God's children and thus our responsibility to protect and care for each other?

Simon the Pharisee didn't understand that. He couldn't understand because his pride got in the way. Pride is like that, you know. We set

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ourselves up as experts on all sorts of matters. “Watched a couple of TV medical dramas and went on WebMD and now I’m ready to diagnose and treat whatever ails you.” And we imagine ourselves as qualified to judge the totality of other human beings too. “Your sins are easy to see and a lot worse than mine.” And it is so hard to see the pride in ourselves and so difficult to change. One of the early church fathers said, “Men can heal the lustful. Angels can heal the malicious. Only God can heal the proud.” (John Climacus quoted by Kathleen Norris, *The Cloister Walk*, 136.) Let us pray for God to heal our pride. Because of his pride, all Simon seemed to see before him was a failed prophet and “a sinful woman,” damaged goods, maybe available to be damaged some more.

But that’s not who Jesus saw. He saw a precious child of God whose life had gone awry and who recognized it and admitted it. “I got shame like a habit...” But in the presence of Jesus somehow this woman realized her many sins were forgiven. In response, she gave Jesus the tear-drenched, hair-dried hospitality, the feet-kissed, ointment-anointed holy welcome he deserved. In her gratitude to God in Jesus Christ, she gave everything she had to show her love. And Jesus said to her, “Your

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faith has saved you; go in peace.” In other words, God’s forgiveness was freely given to her through Jesus, but it was important that that forgiveness be *accepted* by the woman in faith so that she could go in peace.

Have you and I ever conducted an inventory of our lives and really imagined all the sins we’ve committed over a lifetime. Now some of you are younger and nicer than I am, but even for you, if you think about it, it’s an impressive amount of sin, isn’t it? All the mean things we’ve thought over the years. Decades of awful stuff we’ve said and done and the opportunities to say and do the good, but we’ve squandered because we were lazy or selfish. Don’t even get started with sexual sins. And pride, let’s not talk about that either, because pride drives all the other sins, doesn’t it? Imagine all the sin we commit over a lifetime. It’s a mountain of sin. An ocean of evil. A quagmire of wickedness.

And by God’s amazing grace in Jesus Christ it is all forgiven. All of it—forgiven. Fantastic.

Oh, I know maybe you’re like me, and you sometimes want to bring up an old sin and discuss it with God again. “Lord, I know I

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confessed this sin a long time ago, but it really seems worse than the others. So I think I might need to feel guilty about it again. Don't you think?" And what does God say? "No. You don't need to dwell upon it or feel guilty about it again. It is forgiven. Blotted out. Erased. Gone. Kissed goodbye. Let it go. Let it go. Live in freedom and gladness."

"Your faith has saved you, go in peace."

Sometimes when people realize just how much they're forgiven and loved by God, they get a little out of control. Joy takes hold of them. They give their lives over to Christ in gratitude and love. They live with a new kind of peace. They have a renewed focus of worship and service not as drudgery but as thanksgiving.

I once sat in a surgical center prep room with a young mother and father as they were waiting for their little boy to have surgery. The surgery was outpatient, but it was still serious with full anesthesia. And whenever it's you or your child, there's no such thing as "minor surgery," is there? But sitting in the room, this kid was like other kids that age—unfazed, curious about everything, asking questions, laughing. After awhile, the surgeon came in and he had excellent rapport with the

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child and parents—relaxed, comfortable, confident. Finally, someone administered a drug that would make the child sleepy. And as the drug began to take effect, the boy grew quiet, his eyes half-closed as he rested, cradled in his mother's lap, his head on her shoulder. The mom's eyes filled with tears. "I hate this part," she whispered to her husband and me. And then she gave her son a kiss. And then another. And then another. Just kept kissing him. Why? Was it just nervousness about the surgery? No. Guilt about something in her own life? Of course not. An onerous chore she felt she had to complete? Not at all. She kissed him because her gratitude and love for him overflowed. "I just can't help myself," she said.

Two thousand years ago, God's love for us overflowed, all our sins washed away, kissed goodbye forever. A precious and forgiven woman at a banquet with Jesus understood that and poured herself out to him with her own grateful kisses. And sometimes we also understand and pour out our lives in gratitude too. We just can't help ourselves.

Amen. ©Jeff Paschal