



* **"IN NEED OF FORGIVENESS"**

Biblical Text: Luke 7:36-48

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March Madness is almost over. *The Final Four is next Saturday in Phoenix, Arizona. It will feature four great teams – by this afternoon we will know who. *And in a **shocking** turn of events, Ann and I will actually be rooting for the same team - I can't believe I'm saying it as a true Kansas State fan who bleeds purple - but *GO HAWKS!

And what does that have to do with our Biblical text today? ***Not much, really!** I could try to overstress a very marginal connection to our text like preachers do, but why not be honest about it? The best I can do is to say that the way our Gospel lesson from Luke 7 begins is also shocking. Of course, we don't read it that way.

As we open our Bibles to Luke 7:36 where the passage begins, and look at that verse, well, it sounds pretty boring to us: **"One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him."*¹ Jesus was always eating and drinking with someone.

But when we stop to think about it – these are the same Pharisees who asked earlier in Luke 5:30, **"Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?"* The same Pharisees that in Luke 7:34 called him **"a glutton and a drunk, a friend of tax collectors and sinners."* It would be like you or me inviting our worst enemy over to watch the games today. Or President Trump inviting Nancy Pelosi to tea.

*Regardless of why it happened, the story of what happened at that dinner party turned out to be a big deal. The event is recorded in all four Gospels and that's uncommon. And Jesus said we should remember the woman at the center of the story. Matthew 26:13 and Mark 14:9 both say: **"Wherever this gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her."*²

But here, as in so many things, we fall short. Rachel Held Evans reminds us: **"We know there is a woman. We know there is an anointing. We know there is expensive, perfumed oil. We know there is a protest. But when it comes to the details Jesus wanted us to tell others ... we couldn't even be bothered to remember her name."*³

And indeed, in Matthew, Mark and Luke her name is not even mentioned. *That's likely why art and images associated with her often identify her as Mary Magdalene.

¹ Luke 7:36, *New Revised Standard Version of the Bible*. Copyright © 1989 the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

² Op. Cit. Matthew 26:13 and Mark 14:9, *New Revised Standard Version of the Bible*.

³ Rachel Held Evans' Blog: *"Women of the Passion, Part 1: The Woman at Bethany Anoints Jesus"* - Copyright © 2012 All rights reserved.

*And if you ask most any group of Christians who the woman was they will agree. *Or else someone will answer, *“She was a prostitute,”* or * *“she was the woman caught in adultery.”* Really? *Why do we always assume the worst about people?

We've had this all wrong for centuries. *Liz Curtis Higgs, author of Bad Girls of the Bible, which is generally a very good read, says this about her: *“We don't know her name, her age, or her history. We know only that she was bad for a season. *To be specific, she sold her body for money. Her sinful lifestyle was common knowledge.”*⁴

But that isn't what the Bible says. *Luke's Gospel is the only place that mentions her sin, and it just calls her *“a sinner”* - which of course could be said of any of us. Romans 3:23 says, *“All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.”*⁵

But Luke 7, Matthew 26, Mark 4 and John 12 all tell us there are *lessons for us in the story of the woman who anointed Jesus' feet with her tears and lavish perfume.

Luke 7:37-39 tells us her story. *“A woman in the city, a sinner, learned that (Jesus) was eating at a Pharisee's house. *She brought an alabaster jar of ointment and stood behind him at his feet, weeping. *She bathed his feet with her tears and dried them with her hair, kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment.”*⁶

And in Luke 7:48, Jesus tells her straight out, *“Your sins are forgiven.”*⁷ Not will be, not might be, not only if she prays with sufficiently contrition. No, he says your sins **are** forgiven! There is no verbal confession recorded, no sinner's prayer - but she certainly demonstrated her love for a God who forgives completely.

And that same God forgives us! God's Word says over and over, *“God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”* (Romans 5:8).

Forgiven. The word is etched across our hearts. It's a finished work. We may not always feel worthy of his forgiveness, but that doesn't change the fact of it: *“Your sins have been forgiven.”* Done. Thank you, Jesus. But we don't really get that.

Simon didn't clearly **“get it.”** He said to himself, Luke 7:39, *“He (should) have known who she is and what kind of woman this is who is touching him—that she is a sinner.”*⁸

But in Luke 7:40, Jesus calls out the Pharisee by name, saying, *“Simon, I have something to say to you.”*⁹ That's instructive – if we read no farther. In our culture, today, we have an increasingly difficult time engaging in civil discourse.

⁴ Liz Curtis Higgs, Bad Girls of the Bible and What We Can Learn From Them, Copyright ©1999, WaterBrook Press.

⁵ Op. Cit. Romans 3:23, New Revised Standard Version of the Bible.

⁶ Luke 7:37-39, paraphrased by the author from several English Versions of the Bible.

⁷ Op. Cit. Luke 7:48, New Revised Standard Version of the Bible.

⁸ Ibid. Luke 7:39, New Revised Standard Version of the Bible.

⁹ Ibid. Luke 7:40, New Revised Standard Version of the Bible.

* Instead, we pin labels on each other, “CON-servative,” “Lib-tard,” “Nazi,” “Pinko.” That last one was my father’s ultimate dismissive insult. The problem is that when we label people or call names, we don’t want a discussion, we intend disrespect.

* But Jesus doesn’t do so. He doesn’t attack Simon or call him names. He calls him by his own name and gives him a new perspective on the woman he so easily dismissed.

In Luke 7:44, Jesus honors her act of love and devotion for him, by saying to Simon, * *“Do you see this woman?”*¹⁰ Of course, that’s the problem. Simon doesn’t see the woman. He only sees the sinner. Jesus sees the woman - her humanity – her need - her love. *“Do you see this woman?”* Jesus asks Simon, and us.

* Poignantly, Jesus adds: The one who is forgiven little loves little. He means people like Simon. He’s not saying that Simon needs less forgiveness than this woman. Only that he thinks he does. But if he could overlook such basic hospitality as water to wash his guest’s feet—might there be other things he’s overlooked? In his own heart? His own need to be forgiven? Which, of course, happens for of us.

* Matthew, Mark, and John record slightly different wordings of another phrase from Jesus: * *“The poor you will always have with you, but you will not always have me.”*

* Jesus meaning is of course that his followers will always minister to the poor, but it does not negate her gift of love. But his words have recently been used to justify neglect of the poor. How ironic and unconscionable that Jesus’ words which are often a call to accountability for our neglect of the poor have been so misused!

* Check out Matthew 25:40, *“In as much as you have done it for the least of these – the poor – the hungry – this woman – you have done it for me.”* His position is clear.

The obvious lesson for Simon and for us in this text from Luke is that we are accountable for how we deal with others, like the poor and like this sinful woman. Simon distances himself from the woman as we often do from people in need. But Jesus moves toward her with forgiveness and grace.

I love Fred Craddock’s words about how Jesus responds to her:

* *“She doesn’t need more rejection. *She needs a community of forgiven and forgiving sinners. * She needs a Church that says, ‘You are welcome here.’”*¹¹

Don’t we all? *

¹⁰ Ibid. Luke 7:44, *New Revised Standard Version of the Bible*.

¹¹ Fred B. Craddock, *Luke: Interpretation Commentary Series*, Copyright © 1990, Westminster John Knox Press. Pg. 104.