

Stepping Out in Faith sermon series
The Woman Who Washed Jesus' Feet
Luke 7:36-50
October 5, 2020
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When I lived in Chicago, I was invited to a very fancy fundraiser dinner by some well-to-do church members. I lived a good distance and several hundred thousand dollars away from where the church was located, so I think they took pity on me. The dinner was in a posh hotel and had all the bells and whistles entitlement could buy. When it came time for dinner, I sat down in my seat to find that my place setting contained enough utensils, plates, and glasses for a church potluck. I had to ask my hosts what each fork was for. "Oh, that's the shrimp fork." Good! I love shrimp." "Oh, there won't be any shrimp served. It's just part of the setting."

I wonder if the woman in our story felt as out of place at this dinner as I did at mine. At least I had been invited; this woman shows up unannounced and unwanted by the host. As we continue our "Stepping Out in Faith" sermon series, we're going to look this morning at a sinful woman who breaks several social taboos much worse than using the wrong fork in order to get close to Jesus.

Jesus has been invited to the home of Simon the Pharisee for dinner. Now, it might seem strange that Jesus would accept such an invitation, because the Pharisees were some of Jesus' most vocal critics. In fact, in Luke 5:30 the Pharisees had blasted Jesus for eating with tax collectors and sinners. So what better way to answer his critics than to share a meal with **them**, to prove he's an equal-opportunity dinner companion?

Luke tells us that Jesus reclined at the table, which would have been the natural way of eating. For formal meals, the guests would lie on their side, propped up on an elbow, with their feet pointing away from the table. Eating in such a fashion was a sign of status and wealth and would have been expected at the home of a religious leader. This would also have given the woman easy access to Jesus' feet.

You may be wondering how she got into the Pharisee's house in the first place. It was custom at that time that when someone had a noted guest over for dinner, especially a Rabbi, all kinds of people were free to come in and listen to the pearls of wisdom he would share. This woman was most likely one of a crowd that had drifted in to see Jesus while he ate.

There's another custom of the time that sets the stage in the story for the woman's action. When a guest entered a house for a visit or meal, three things were usually done: first, a kiss of peace was exchanged, like a handshake in our day. Next, a servant would pour cool water over the guest's feet to cleanse them from a long day walking down dusty roads. Finally, a drop of scented oil was placed on the guest's head, probably to help combat the smell of a long day walking down dusty roads. These three acts were considered common courtesy and showed respect to the guest and would have been not only expected but required for a guest as renowned as Jesus.

However, in a show of disrespect, the Pharisee forgoes the basic rituals of hospitality toward Jesus. Instead, we're told a woman who lived a sinful life fulfills the rituals, kissing Jesus' feet and cleansing them with her tears, then anointing him with oil.

The irony of the sinful guest stepping out in faith to outdo the elitist host would not have been lost on Luke's readers.

Her actions would have created front-page scandal for several reasons. First, she was a prostitute, and for a female in her line of work to approach and touch a male rabbi would have been the highest level of disrespect, because her touch would make him ritually unclean. Second, the woman violates a social convention when she lets loose her hair to wipe Jesus' feet. A woman's unbound hair was considered a sexual temptation and a social taboo. So, for this woman to not only let her hair down but then use it to wipe Jesus' feet would have been an act of dangerous sensuality and grave immodesty.

When the Pharisee starts to inwardly judge Jesus, Jesus calls him out and tells the parable of the forgiving of debts. And then Jesus asks him a pointed question: "Do you see this woman?" Did he see her, or did he just see an obstacle, a nuisance, an intrusion into his evening? In his self-centered, self-righteous worldview, did he see this woman?

Do you know what C.S. Lewis calls "the great sin?" Not adultery, not murder, not stealing or lying or cheating. It's pride. Pride. And it's the one we're all most susceptible to committing, because on the surface it's the least harmful. It's certainly the one that tripped up the Pharisee. The opposite of pride is humility, which Rick Warren defines as "not thinking less of yourself, but thinking of yourself less." And that's exactly what the Pharisee failed to do. He thought enough of himself to believe he didn't need anything from Jesus, and therefore didn't feel an obligation to give him anything, like a warm greeting. And he certainly didn't feel that a sinner deserved a place at his table.

There's a part of me that wants to condemn the Pharisee for his rudeness, but there's another part of me that understands where he's coming from. Do feel that, too? How many rungs up the ladder do you see yourself from this woman? When we see the amount of sin that exists in our world, and we take a look at the relatively good lives that we lead, we're doing OK. In fact, more than OK. So many others have given into temptation, have run from God, have been swallowed by their sins, but not us. We have done our best to live faithful, disciplined lives, haven't we? So we find it difficult to tolerate a lack of faith and discipline in others. How dare this woman, this prostitute, interrupt their meal? She's not one of us; she's a sinner! Pride is self-esteem at the expense of others.

And here's where the Pharisee gets into the deepest trouble. As a religious leader, he believes he's worked so hard and done so well to obey God's law that he no longer sees himself as a sinner in need of forgiveness. Now, he'd be the first in a group of people to publicly spout the party line that everyone is a sinner and needs forgiveness, but in his heart he believes he's only a little sinner. If pride is his worst offense, how bad can he be? Sin is doing really bad things. Forgiveness means not being punished for those things. But really, how often do we do really bad things? Not very often. If pride is our worst sin, we're doing better than the majority, aren't we? Pride doesn't kill people, it does take their belongings, it isn't dishonest. Do we really need to get down on our knees and ask for forgiveness? No, at least not like those other sinners in the world need to. They're the ones who should be falling at Jesus' feet, not us.

Pride is dangerous because it makes us forget that we are all in the position of the woman at Jesus' feet. We'd all like to think we've earned a place at the table, that we're above the need for forgiveness because we just don't sin that badly. But the Bible doesn't make a distinction between little sins and big ones. Yes, it's a sin to do bad things, but

it's also a sin not to do good things, like seeking justice for others or helping those in need. It's a sin to look down on others, to think ourselves better than someone else, to presume that we are in some way less sinful than anyone else. We are all guilty of those things, and we're all in need of God's forgiveness. And that forgiveness is found only when we let go of our pride and humbly place ourselves at the feet of Jesus, admitting that we are just as in need of forgiveness as the prostitute and the tax collector.

When we do that, an amazing thing happens. Yes, we are forgiven, which is an incredibly gracious gift, but it's so much more than that. "Do you see this woman?" When we step out in faith and humble ourselves before Jesus, not only are we changed, but our view of others changes as well. We no longer see others as enemies, or political rivals, or a means to an end. When we see them through the eyes of Christ, we see the potential for a changed heart and a changed life through forgiveness, the same transformation invitation we've been offered.

This story is important for us to hear because, right now, our world is filled with pride and devoid of humility. Many of us hold strongly to our beliefs about what's right, what's just, whose lives matter the most, and which person should be leading our country. And, while we'd like to think our convictions come from a place of sincerity, we also have to admit that our pride is a factor. We know what is best, we know who is best, and anyone who disagrees is obviously misguided. The more we dig in our heels, the less we listen to each other and the more we become captive to our pride.

So, as we approach this election, let's take a knee, not to support a cause, but to humble ourselves before Christ. Let's remember that Christ came for sinners, and that's not just the people we disagree with, but that's us, as well. We are in as much need of forgiveness as the people we choose not to forgive. In our world, stepping out in faith means being willing to humble ourselves and recognize that we are no more worthy of being a guest at Christ's table than the people we have demonized. And yet, to receive Christ's forgiveness for our sins means to offer it to others. He died for us so that we would be forgiven. To understand that simple yet profound statement is to understand that when Jesus extends an invitation to the table to share a meal, all are invited: the tax collector, the sinner, the Pharisee, even you and me. Thanks be to God.