

If anyone is thinking, “Didn’t we just hear about this woman with the oil?,” the answer is, “Yes – and no.”

Yes, three months ago, during Lent, we read about Mary, the sister of Lazarus and Martha, pouring costly oil over Jesus, and Judas objecting the oil could have been sold and given to the poor. (John 12) As we will hear, there is a different economics reference in today’s lesson.

But also, no, we did not hear the same story, because it is not the same woman, or the same setting. In the other gospels, this story is told as an act of devotion, an anointing in preparation for Jesus’ burial. Luke places the account early in Jesus’ ministry, and clearly meant to be a lesson on sin and forgiveness.

Luke introduces the woman simply as a known sinner, but over the years tradition has embellished this unnamed woman’s history, suggesting only a prostitute could afford to perfumed oil in an alabaster jar. It makes for a good story, seemingly affirmed by the provocatively seductive wiping of Jesus’ feet with her hair. It has at least a PG-13 rating, which is why we omitted a bit of the imagery and innuendo with the children.

Yet, before we allow the suggestive and shameful to become our reality, let us note that nowhere are the woman’s sins itemized. We simply are told her sins are many...and they are forgiven...and [spoiler alert] they are forgiven even before she crashes Simon the Pharisee’s dinner party for Jesus. Luke 7:36-8:3:

³⁶*One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and Jesus went into the Pharisee’s house and took his place at the table.* ³⁷*And a woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that Jesus was eating in the Pharisee’s house, brought an alabaster jar of [perfumed oil.]* 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. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the [oil.]* ³⁹*Now when the Pharisee who had invited Jesus saw it, he said to himself,*

[speaking to audience as a thought] *“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 creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii – [today, let’s think \$50,000], and the other fifty denarii – [today, \$5,000.]* 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, Jesus 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. ⁴⁵You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. ⁴⁶You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. ⁴⁷Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.”*

⁴⁸*Then Jesus 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*And Jesus said to the woman, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.”*

The word of the Lord. ... But wait, there are three more verses in the lectionary reading. They have nothing to do with this story, but are transition verses that tell of who is following Jesus other than the twelve called disciples. It turns out to be people who have not only received healing and grace, but are generous in response – they also happen to be women, something that in Jesus’ time would be considered counter-cultural. So, if you are speaking with someone who questions the inclusion and acceptance of women in Jesus’ ministry, these few verses are instructive.

Soon afterwards Jesus went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, ²as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, ³and Joanna, the wife of Herod’s steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their resources.

Both as a pastor, and in the two times I have served as a stated clerk in a presbytery, I have sought to enable all voices to be heard in critical discussions. Even if there is to be a vote in which a majority will prevail, the right of the minority to not only speak, but be heard, is critical for me.

Yet as idealistic and noble as this sounds, I admit there are times I have looked out at the faces of those gathered for a meeting or discussion forum, and I notice a particular person in attendance and I think, “Oh my, this is going to be interesting.” Actually, that is a mild version of what I may be actually thinking. Suffice it to say my noble ideals succumb to ignoble thoughts of wishing that person would disappear, or be called away for an emergency.

Pharisee Simon invited teacher Jesus to dinner. In the culture of that day, and as we continue to say today, one is known by the company one keeps. The honor and status of Simon is affected by those he invites to dine with him. That’s what’s now on the line when you know who walks in with her alabaster jar. She is invading Simon’s space, and violating boundaries of class, gender and status. Everyone seems to know her name is sinner, and no one by that name is on Simon’s guest list. My guess is Simon was also thinking something other than simply, “Oh my, this is going to be interesting.”

Yet, Simon neither calls for a bouncer to toss out the woman, nor does he ask the women of the household to take her aside. We know there is often an underlying plot line in Luke’s gospel, particularly when religious leaders are intent on catching Jesus in either misspeak or misdeed.

In the culture of that day, for a woman to publicly touch a man in such a way was shameful. Yet, it was equally shameful for a man not to stop her doing so. So Simon waits, and watches. One wonders if Simon even waved off those who would stop her, watching to see what Jesus would do or say. He has heard Jesus is a prophet, but what he sees contradicts this. We are told he thinks to himself, if Jesus is a prophet, he would know what kind of woman is touching him.

Last October I took a course that briefly looked at each lectionary text in Luke being read over this year. In my notes, I had jotted down these words – Kim Davis, gay couple, prisoners. I was recalling Pope Francis' trip to this country. At the time, people were wondering about whether the Pope really knew with whom he was meeting. Some could not understand how he could meet with a county clerk from Kentucky who refused to issue marriage licenses to same sex couples. Others could not understand how he could meet with a gay couple. Still others wondered about him spending time with prisoners. Doesn't Pope Francis know the kind of persons with whom he is meeting? Doesn't Jesus know this woman is a sinner? Are they unaware one is known by the company you keep?

Jesus says, "Simon, I have something to tell you." Even while fostering doubts about him, Simon addresses Jesus with an honorific title, saying, "Teacher, speak." Then Jesus tells a parable based on what he has heard Simon thinking. I love that, so let me repeat it. Jesus tells a parable based on what he has heard Simon thinking. Now how prophetic is that? – to hear what someone is thinking. I think of Radar O'Reilly in the television series MASH.

Now, the parable Jesus tells is a no brainer. If one person is forgiven a debt of \$50,000 won't she or he be more grateful than one forgiven just \$5,000, ten times less? The Pharisee understands it. I do too, though I wonder about the parable's practicality.

Honest lenders do not cheat their customers, but they do need to make enough to earn a living. Lenders can be lenient, giving someone more time to pay, but if they begin to fully forgive debts, one can rightly say, that's no way to run a business.

Of course, Jesus is not offering a business model, but a forgiveness lesson. He is focusing on the magnitude of forgiveness. In our English translations, we can easily miss that when Jesus says, the woman's sins "have been forgiven," he is not granting forgiveness at that moment, which then prompts her response. Luke puts Jesus' words in the perfect tense of a forgiveness that has already been received. Might the woman have been in a crowd when Jesus was teaching, and heard and believed and turned her life around? Might Jesus have even spoken with her directly? We don't know where or when or how the woman was forgiven, but when she enters Simon's house, and goes directly to Jesus, she is not seeking forgiveness. She walked into Simon's dinner party as a forgiven woman. She is shedding tears of joy and pouring out her precious oil with abandon in gratitude for the forgiveness she has received, the love she has been shown, the freedom she now feels.

And I expect Simon still wants her out. When I look out at those gathered for a meeting or discussion, and see that person I wish would disappear, it may be because she or he always seems to speak in antagonistic or bombastic ways, or act as if God has ordained them alone with truth, or worse, seems to have an ability to twist or make up facts to suit a personal passion or bias. Perhaps I could be the one to anonymously call their cell phone and create an emergency.

Yet, sometimes I look out and see one whose presence does actually make me think, "Oh my, this is going to be interesting." This is a person who does speak truth, but it is often truth that makes others uncomfortable, pricking the conscience for justice, or making a claim for equality. It is the one in the church who suggests we need to talk about same sex marriage laws, or mental health issues, or transgender rights, or how we can be faithful while living such comfortable lifestyles.

This is how I think we may view the woman who crashes the dinner party. Oh, we like the fact she seems to allow Jesus to stick it to a Pharisee, telling Simon he did not show any hospitality or greet with oil when he arrived. But if it is our dinner party, we may prefer to keep her out, not because of her sin, but because she touches a nerve that reveals our own failure to live as freed and forgiven people – or perhaps that our gratitude is stuck at the \$5,000 level.

Everyone else saw the woman as a sinner. Jesus saw one whose life had changed. and told the woman, “Your sins are forgiven.” She believed it and received it, and her response was scandalous, crossing boundaries of culture, gender and class. When he tells her directly, “Your faith has saved you,” he is saying, “Your name is no longer sinner. You are on my guest list.”

As I once heard someone suggest, in her actions of devotion and gratitude, the woman preached a sermon without words. Simon did not hear it. Jesus heard her sermon, and sent the woman on her way with his peace.

The woman challenges me to offer my joy of being forgiven with reckless abandon. For, if I do not think I have received anything of great significance from Jesus, my response will simply be ho-hum. And when it comes to forgiveness, ho-hum is not Jesus’ way of doing business.