

In the Shadow of the Cross Poured Out But Not Wasted

Luke 7:36-8:1



TRINITY PULPIT



It is a place maybe we ought to expect to find Jesus. Jesus invited by the Pharisee, Simon, comes to Simon's home for dinner. Jesus is invited and Jesus comes. While reclining at the table, we are told that a woman who learns that Jesus is at this house comes to the house and anoints Jesus. We are not told why this woman is welcomed in this house in the beginning. How does a woman with a bad reputation get entrance into the home of the Pharisee? Yet, she finds herself right there with Jesus and the others. When she arrives she seems to move quickly to do what she came to do.

She comes and stands behind Jesus at his feet and begins to weep, while washing his dusty feet with her tears and her hair. Then taking an alabaster jar of perfume, she pours it upon Jesus feet. This, to say the least, is an intimate moment. It is an awkward moment for everyone in the room except Jesus and the woman.

Simon for his part is indignant, but he seems to be a clumsy host. We are told later that Simon had been rude to Jesus. He had not offered him the normal and customary acts of hospitality. He had offered him no water to clean his feet. It was customary for one to offer water to wash ones feet from the dusty roads and streets. Nothing had been offered to Jesus. Simon had not greeted Jesus with a kiss. A kiss was a common custom of greeting and welcome. He had not offered Jesus olive oil for his head another act of hospitality. In essence, when Jesus arrived at Simon's house he was sent the signal that you are invited to a dinner but not much else. We don't know if Simon was just a poor host or if this lack of hospitality was a subtle way of letting Jesus know he was invited, but not really welcomed yet.

There is a difference between interacting and welcoming people into our lives. We

can interact with many people, but spend our lives keeping them at arms length. It is thought that Jesus' invite might have been an obligation for Simon. It could be as a visiting Rabbi, Jesus was to be invited into the home of one of the prominent members of the congregation. So out of obligation Jesus is invited, but he is not really welcomed. It could have been out of curiosity. Simon was curious about Jesus, intrigued by Jesus, and so he was invited but not welcomed. It could be that Simon was so concerned about self that he failed to even see his own shortcomings. We know from the story that Simon is very concerned about his reputation, Jesus' reputation and the woman's reputation. When you live your life worried about what others are thinking in every moment, you really do not have time to be open and attentive to others.

I find it interesting that Simon's remarks, we are told, was to himself. Simon says to himself, or under his breath, if this man is a prophet he would know the kind of woman this is touching him. She is a sinner! It could be Simon is so focused on himself and what others think about him that just does not have the ability to be attentive to others.

Contrast this with the acts of the woman. We are told she is a woman of bad reputation in that town. She is the one that everyone whispers about behind her back. By Simon saying something to himself, or under his breath, is just the norm for this woman. We are told that she is a sinner. Is she a part of the people who were considered sinners by their occupations? The sinners included, as we know the tax collector, tanners, and custom collectors. Even the poor were sometimes considered sinners. One occupation that would be included would be prostitution. Some have suggested that this woman was a prostitute. Thus her notoriety as sinner was not only connected with occupation and category, but with

not be remembered for this as much as his love and concern for the homeless and poor of our city. He was instrumental in all of the mission's ministries to the homeless by First Baptist. Mike seemed to be someone who could minister to the most powerful and the one's who were powerless. Mike seemed to understand that both need Christ. Both have a debt that cannot be paid.

The woman brought an alabaster jar full of perfume and poured it out on Jesus' feet. It was poured out but it was poured out in love and it was not wasted.

I have no alabaster jar of perfume, what shall we bring? - Paul says

In view of God's mercy, let us present our bodies as living sacrifices holy and pleasing to God for this is our reasonable act of worship.

In view of God's mercy and forgiveness, let us pour out our lives for Christ. If we do our lives will not be wasted.



immorality as well. Others have suggested that the woman had an immoral reputation. It could be she was not a “prostitute” but a woman of low moral standards who may have had the reputation of being with many men in that town.

She bows behind Jesus and begins to weep. She allows her tears to be the water to wash Jesus’ feet. Not using a towel, she lets down her hair, another cultural transgression sometimes worthy of divorce for a married woman, and wipes his feet with her hair. Then taking an alabaster jar she pours perfume not on his head, but on his feet. In essence, she did not feel worthy to pour it on his head but placed it instead on the last place you would find perfume. It was a symbolic act of love. Jesus would say to Simon you gave me no oil for my head, but she poured perfume on my feet to stress the significance of this act.

The unnamed woman, unlike Simon the Pharisee, was not so worried about reputation. She did not have one to protect. Her reputation in this town was already poor and so she had nothing to lose that day. When she learns that Jesus is there she wants to be there. There have been many interpretations to the woman’s actions that day. Had she had an encounter with Jesus already that led her to this great act of love? Were her tears, tears of joy or tears of repentance?

We might get some insight if we look to Jesus’ words. He says of her in verse 47, “therefore I tell you her many sins have been forgiven for she loved much.” Then Jesus said to her “your sins are forgiven.” The question is who is this that forgives sin? How can this man say he forgives sin since sin is against God and only God can forgive sin? Yet, Jesus is not only asserting himself as God’s son but more than this, he is sharing the good news of forgiveness that is for all people. In Paul Tillich’s commentary on this passage, he writes:

Jesus declares that she is forgiven. Her state of mind, her ecstasy of love, show that something has happened to her. And nothing greater can happen to a human being than that he or she is forgiven. For forgiveness means reconciliation in spite of estrangement; it means reunion in spite of hostility; it means acceptance of those who are unacceptable, and it means reception of those who are rejected.

Tillich goes on to say that the sinner understands forgiveness as unconditional, that which comes

in spite of whom we are. In contrast, the self-righteous add to forgiveness the word because. They believe that forgiveness is a result of some condition, which they have produced.

The woman comes to Jesus that day in spite of who she is and not because of who she is. She comes without anything that makes her forgiven to receive forgiveness and now in an unmeasured moment she expresses her love and joy.

There is one other figure in this story we must now focus our thoughts upon and that is the Lord Jesus.

This passage is interesting because the other three gospels have a similar story, but it is found in a complete different place and time in the life of Jesus. The other three gospels contain an anointing at Bethany by a woman who John identifies as Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus. In the story contained in the other three gospels, the emphasis is on Jesus’ upcoming death. Jesus says of Mary’s act, “she has prepared me for my burial through this anointing.”

Yet, the anointing story of Luke is in a different town and at a different time. There has been much effort to synchronize these stories, but they are so different and their purpose is so different it is probably best to leave them as separate stories. So, if the other story reveals Jesus’ upcoming death on the cross, what does this one tell us about Jesus?

I think it reminds us of the approachability of Jesus. There is nothing but personal and intimate language in this scene. There is nothing but complete acceptance of this woman into Jesus’ space and personhood. The one that everyone else says should be rejected... is received. The one that everyone whispers under his or her breath about, Jesus speaks forgiveness.

We are not told what it is but there is something in Jesus that makes him approachable in this story. We are only told that when the woman hears that he is at the Pharisee’s home, she came. There does not seem to be any self-doubt or rejection. In fact, I would argue that there is boldness in her that knows she will be received.

She is not only received, but also celebrated for her act of love. Tillich would write again:

We cannot love where we feel rejected, even if the rejection is done in righteousness. We are hostile towards that to which we belong and by

which we feel judged, even if the judgment is not expressed in words.

As long as we feel rejected by Him, we cannot love God. He appears to us as an oppressive power, as He who gives laws according to His pleasure, who judges according to His commandments, who condemns according to His wrath. But if we have received and accepted the message that He is reconciled, everything changes. Like a fiery stream His healing power enters into us; we can affirm Him and with Him our own being and the others from whom we were estranged, and life as a whole. Then we realize that His love is the law of our own being, and that it is the law of reuniting love. And we understand that what we have experienced as oppression and judgment and wrath is in reality the working of love, which tries to destroy within us everything, which is against love. To love this love is to love God. Theologians have questioned whether man is able to have love towards God; they have replaced love by obedience. But they are refuted by our story. They teach a theology for the righteous ones but not a theology for the sinners. He who is forgiven knows what it means to love God.

It is James Bryan Smith who suggests that what we think about God is the most important decision we make in our lives. If we think God exists then our approach to life is altered. If we think that God is mostly about judgment then it colors the way we live, but if we think the picture that Jesus paints of God is correct then we know that God loves us and forgives us we are then able to approach the One who was thought to be unapproachable.

Jesus reminds us in this passage that God is approachable, even by the one who had nothing to bring.

Jesus reminds us that we must learn to see people for who they truly are. Jesus says something very interesting to Simon at the end of the parable. In verse 44 Jesus invites Simon to see this woman. Jesus says to Simon “Do you see this woman?” What a question that must have been for Simon. Do I see her? I see nothing but her. She has come into my

house and made a spectacle of herself and you. Do I see her? Of course I see her?

Yet, although Jesus does not name her, his tone is different than Luke’s language of narration. Luke says of the woman she was a woman who lived in that town whose definition is a sinful life. When Jesus says to Simon, “do you see this woman?” there is a different tone. It is an invitation to see beyond the reputation. It is an invitation to see this woman. It is to see the person and not the reputation. It is to see this present moment and not the past. It is to see the person through all of the trappings that this life had placed on her.

JESUS INVITES US TO SEE OTHERS AS JESUS SEES THEM. HE INVITES US TO SEE BEYOND THE REPUTATIONS, BEYOND THE STEREOTYPES, BEYOND THE NAME-CALLING, THE DESIGNATIONS WE GIVE AND SEE WHEN WE LOOK AT THIS PERSON AND OTHERS.

Jesus invites us to see others as Jesus sees them. He invites us to see beyond the reputations, beyond the stereotypes, beyond the name-calling, the designations we give and see when we look at this person and others.

Jesus also reminds us that there is a debt we all owe. Jesus tells this parable that there were two who owed a debt. One owed a small debt and the other a larger debt but here is something we

miss... they all owe a debt they cannot pay. The smaller debt is forgiven, just as much as the larger one is forgiven. It is just the man with the larger debt seems to appreciate it more.

Jesus was letting Simon know that he too owed a debt. That was news to Simon. That was the revolutionary moment. Everyone knew this woman owed a debt, but could it be that Simon with all of his efforts of goodness and righteousness also had sin debt? Yes, we all have a debt.

Mike Morris is one of my good friends. I have known Mike for 25 years. When I first came to Trinity in 1987 as an Interim Youth Minister, Mike went to First Baptist Raleigh as a part time Singles Minister. I have moved many times since and Mike has remained at First Baptist. His title has changed many times and he has served with 4 pastors. Mike serves as the chaplain to the Senate at the Legislature and there have been a few times I have filled in that position on the House side. I watched as Mike moved easily in and out of the chambers with the most powerful people of the state. However, as Mike announced his retirement this week he will