

Debt and Gratitude

[Luke 7:36–8:3](#)

Today's gospel lesson is one of the few stories that is depicted in all four gospels. In Matthew 26:6-13, and Mark 14:3-9, Jesus is noted as visiting the house of Simon the leper. (It seems odd to me that whatever infirmity you had, that was how you were known even after you were healed!) In John 12:1-8, Jesus was visiting the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus – whom Jesus raised from the dead. John's gospel noted it was Mary who was anointing Jesus' feet. In Luke's gospel for today, we see a little different tone. Jesus was invited to dine with Simon the Pharisee, yet he was not welcomed as an honored guest. Jesus entered the home as if he was the defendant in a trial while those who sat in judgment waited to make accusations. The woman who anointed Jesus is noted as a sinner. Tradition will have us identifying this woman as Mary

Magdalene yet the scripture never identifies her as this Mary. Luke simply noted that she was a sinful woman. One pastor noted Jesus was invited by a Pharisee, but not welcomed, and he welcomed a sinful woman who was not invited.

As we focus on Luke's gospel today, I wanted us to get a good picture in our minds of the scene taking place at the home of Simon the Pharisee. One detail that I seemed to focus on was how people were positioned and the orientation of this woman to Jesus. Typically, guests were invited into a home and given a seat of honor. One of the first tasks for servants in the home was to wash the feet of visitors. Shoes or sandals were removed when one entered the home, and feet were often dirty from the desert conditions. So Jesus was reclining at the table. This bothered me because I couldn't understand or envision Jesus in a Lazy Boy leaning back from the table! The truth is depicted in

the picture I included in your bulletin [See last page.] If you take a look at this, Jesus was laying on his left side facing a low table. Luke 7:38 says the woman came in and was standing behind Jesus, which also didn't make sense in the typical way we visualize table scenes today. But in this picture you can see she could easily stand behind him as I'm sure servants would do to wash feet without disturbing the guests.

The only official welcome Jesus received from Simon was an invitation to dine in his home. This was also interesting since Pharisees were very particular about with whom they would share a meal. Jesus routinely ate with sinners and tax collectors. Jesus was not interested in maintaining the strict food laws of Jewish custom. On the other hand, Simon could not imagine life without adhering to these laws and we find these two at the table together. Simon clearly noted his disapproval by not extending

any of the common courtesies that were expected in households of the day. It seems Jesus was invited, but not a guest. Perhaps Simon was more interested in building a case against Jesus by seeing his actions first-hand. In any basic court trial situation, the strongest witnesses were those who had a first-hand account.

The unnamed woman in the story was clearly not invited to dine at the home of a Pharisee. Her reputation preceded her.

Verse 37 says, “When a woman who had lived a sinful life in that town learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee’s house....” Pharisees did not have anything to do with sinners.

But this woman knew that Jesus was dining at a home near her.

I have to wonder about this woman’s motivation. One living in sin usually knows it. Maybe she saw the hope and meaning for her life she was looking for. But she doesn’t just go to Jesus and confess her sins. I can picture her entering Simon’s home,

maybe assessing the scene. It would not be hard to see how Jesus was being treated. She recognized Jesus for his compassion and ability to forgive her sins, but clearly his host did not. One of the lowliest jobs among servants of a household was the duty of washing guests' feet. It was given to the youngest, least experienced, and least skilled servant as literally the worst job of the household. This sinful woman took on this job in a very unique way. The water for washing was her tears, the towel was her hair, and her best perfume was the anointing oil. She literally poured out her soul at the feet of Jesus.

The ever-present critics were quick to find fault in this woman's actions. Even Biblical scholars have successfully found fault with Luke's account of the scene, looking for the subliminal messages and subtexts. Simon criticized Jesus for not knowing who this woman was that was touching him. Like

a judge, Simon was quick to drop the gavel and jump right to execution of penalty. Simon still did not recognize Jesus as the Son of God who clearly knew all about this woman.

Jesus then introduced a parable of two debtors – one who owed five hundred denarii and one who owed fifty. When their debts were cancelled, the question was posed to Simon, “Now which of them will love [the moneylender] more?” Clearly it is the one with the bigger debt. This woman’s sins were forgiven just as Simon’s were. However, Simon was more apt to pass judgment and not see the grace of God extended because he saw himself as righteous and not in need of forgiveness. The woman had no doubt of her sin and her need for forgiveness, hence her gratitude is great.

Each of us is in need of forgiveness. Some of us may have past lives we are not proud of. Some of us have been attending

church and hearing the gospel since we were babies – we were teething on communion bread! How do we welcome Jesus in our lives? Are we at a point where we don't think we need God's grace in our lives? Are we looking down on our neighbors who haven't felt God's calling and continue to live in sin? Are we Simon or are we the woman?

These are some powerful questions for us to ask ourselves as individuals and as a church. Passing judgment is almost a human instinct. We have to constantly battle our own prejudices and pre-conceived notions to see beyond the sin and love the sinner. Many times appearances are deceiving. Adam Hamilton was our presenter at annual conference and he described one of his daughters. She is the 'free-spirited' one with spiked hair, piercings, and I believe several tattoos. His question was posed, "Would your church welcome my daughter?" Would we here at

Mt. Tabor? I believe so but beliefs can only get us so far. Our actions can be the difference between saying we are a welcoming congregation and actually being the welcoming congregation we are. I have brought many guests here and the message I receive is the same – this is the most warm, welcoming congregation they have ever worshipped with. Jesus spent most of his time with sinners and outcasts, yet most churches prefer to recruit new members who are part of the ‘in’ crowd. Our open hearts, minds, and doors will say to anyone, “Come worship with us. This is the place for you.”

I wanted to close with a story I’ve shared before but it seems to fit so well with today’s idea of debt, gratitude, and welcome. It was a story I found on the internet and shared with you the day we launched our mission and vision statements to guide us in our discernment of God’s will for this congregation.

A pastor of a large church was about to begin service on a Sunday morning. The pews were packed – there were no empty seats anywhere. Just as the pastor approached the pulpit, a young man entered from the back of the church. He was dressed in torn jeans, a ratty tee shirt, he had tattoos peeking out from under his shirt sleeves, and he had piercings on his face. He scanned the room and saw there were no available seats, so he proceeded down the center aisle and sat on the floor directly in front of the altar. Members of the congregation murmured to themselves and sat staring at the strange young man. The pastor was about to speak when a well-dressed, elderly gentleman seated in the back stood up. He was dressed in a three-piece suit, shined shoes, a gold pocket watch draped over his vest, and he walked with a mahogany cane topped with a gold figure. He proceeded down the aisle and with much effort and the help of those seated

on the front pew, he sat down on the floor next to the visitor. The church members sat in stunned silence. The pastor, upon finding his voice said, “Most of you will not remember the message spoken here today, however I am sure that none of you will forget what you just witnessed.” Our gratitude in Jesus as forgiver of our sins gives us the passion to share our radical hospitality with others. Let us be the church of Jesus Christ in all we say, all we do, and all we are. Amen.

