

## “Forgiven Debtors”

Luke 7:36-50

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“Do you see this woman?!” She has no name. She has no voice. She doesn’t say anything...ever. She just weeps. Washing Jesus’ feet with her tears, drying his feet with her hair, kissing his feet, and anointing his feet with ointment, she expresses her grief and gratitude in silence.

What *is* her name? Some have identified her as Mary Magdalene, a prostitute. But there’s no indication here that she is Mary. *This* woman bears a generic name: “Sinner.” The gospel-writer, Luke, calls her by this “name,” as does the Pharisee, Simon. They are not wrong. She *is* a sinner—Jesus later says that *her sins are many*—but Simon’s attitude toward her does little more than state the obvious. He talks about her like she’s not in the room. To him, she is a name-less, voice-less, sinner; and that is all. Either Simon spoke too loudly or his expression must have betrayed him, because Jesus seems to know what he is thinking—“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.” Simon is righteous, but love-less.

This scene is reminiscent of a parable Jesus tells in Luke 18:9-14 “to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt:

‘Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.’”

I once visited a church in Key West, Florida one Sunday morning not so long ago. It was the kind of church that practiced high liturgical drama, complete with incense, bells, robes, kneelers, and large traveling crosses. And we did everything according to plan, kneeling, praying, singing, listening and giving, as directed. There's a danger to all of this, however. Although I believe it is good and right to worship together every Sunday and do such things, we can fool ourselves into thinking that we are better than those who do not. The danger of this thinking is that we can begin to believe, however subtly, that we do not need God as much as *those people* do.

During a lengthy, straying sermon listing orthodox beliefs, the rector made a passing reference to "the whores of Duvall Street." I was shocked, and wondered if anyone else had a problem with the phrase. Duvall Street is the busiest business district in all of Key West, and there may be people and businesses that have un-Godly, un-Christian practices that border, if not cross over into, whoredom. But this church *on* Duvall Street (and every church) is certainly called to do more than just state the obvious, and exalt itself above its neighbors, lest the gospel remain hidden. Doesn't genuine piety demand that we humble ourselves before God and love our neighbors, who are in need of God's mercy as much as we are? Shouldn't our righteousness draw us closer to God and our neighbors, and not farther away? And what if one of those so-called "whores" was there that morning? Like Simon, that minister spoke as if such men and women were not in the room, as if it were impossible. But they are.

This woman comes into Simon's house and he cannot stand the proximity. Perceiving Simon's discomfort and judgment, Jesus speaks up, and gives "this woman" a voice. "Simon," he says, "I have something to say to you." We might call this a "teach-able moment." "Teacher," Simon replies, "speak." And what Jesus says for this woman is a lesson for Simon and all those who attempt to be righteous without love.

'A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he cancelled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?' (vv. 41-42)

*Here*, Simon judges rightly, whereas he has thus far judged wrongly, answering, "I suppose the one for whom he cancelled the greater debt."

Were this the whole lesson, it would not have been a very effective one; it does not yet have a real object. However, the parable was just the opener to the lesson, Part 1. Part 2 involves acknowledging the presence of this woman, as Jesus turns towards her and asks a loaded question, “Do you see this woman?” She is here. She exists. Part 3 involves Jesus lifting the veil from Simon’s eyes, as he recounts the evening’s events:

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. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. (vv. 44b-46)

Here Jesus shows a marked difference between Simon’s behavior and that of this woman. The difference is their hospitality toward Jesus. Simon has withheld any real gesture of hospitality, whereas this woman (in Simon’s house!) has been the most gracious host. Part 4, the heart of this lesson, explains why this is so: “her sins, which *were* many, *have been* forgiven; *therefore* she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little” (v. 47). Here it all comes together—this woman is not pampering Jesus in order to obtain some kind of favor, her hospitality is a direct response to her sins having been forgiven. Silently and graciously, she receives her forgiveness, welcomes it with humility and passion—washing, kissing, anointing. And just in case she’s not sure, Jesus says to her, “Your sins *are* forgiven.” It’s the first time all evening someone has said something *to her*, and they are the sweetest words anyone will ever hear.

Simon must have felt as if burning coals had been heaped upon him. There were *two* debtors and surely he must have realized then that he was companion to this woman. He—a righteous and devout man, with relatively little to be forgiven—had forgotten that he, too, was still a debtor. His actions show the truth of Jesus’ teaching—“the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.”

Consider the implication—**there is a direct correlation between our capacity to receive forgiveness for ourselves and our ability to love God and others.** Seeking first the Kingdom of God and its righteousness is good and right, but it is also dangerous. For we can deceive ourselves and become gods unto ourselves, who think we can

achieve a state of perfection and self-sufficiency where forgiveness is unnecessary. In this way we would be seeking a kingdom without God—and that is not only idolatrous, but foolish. Like Simon, we would be righteous, but love-less.

Let us not forget that we are forgiven debtors, and that our forgiveness calls us to participate in the reconciling work of Jesus. “Go in peace,” Jesus says. Fred Craddock has asked a great question, “Where does one go when told by Christ ‘Go in peace’? Where is this woman to go? “What she needs,” Craddock says, “is a community of forgiven and forgiving sinners.” To *go in peace* means to be welcomed and to then welcome others. “[G]enuine forgiveness,” Paul Tillich said, “is participation, reunion overcoming the powers of estrangement. And only because this is so, does forgiveness make love possible. We cannot love unless we have accepted forgiveness, and the deeper our experience of forgiveness is, the greater is our love” (Tillich, *The New Being*).

But love is not easy. I imagine that’s why it’s a commandment and not a suggestion. I sometimes wonder how many vacancies in our pews are a result of forgiveness denied. The rule of love also applies to our enemies; those who have harmed us in some way; those who have sinned against us; those whom we believe owe us the greatest debts. “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,” Jesus commands, and the forgiven must forgive. Martin Luther King, Jr. preached that in order to love our enemies, we must first:

...develop and maintain the capacity to forgive. [The one] who is devoid of the power to forgive is devoid of the power to love...Forgiveness does not mean ignoring what has been done or putting a false label on an evil act. It means, rather, that the evil act no longer remains as a barrier to the relationship. Forgiveness is a catalyst creating the atmosphere necessary for a fresh start and a new beginning. It is the lifting of a burden or the canceling of a debt. (*Strength to Love*, 50)

So whenever we pray, “forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors,” remember that we *are* forgiven, burdens are lifted, debts are cancelled. Remember that “if anyone is in Christ there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; everything has become new!” And remember that we

are now a part of the reconciling work of Christ, called to the delightful and difficult work of forgiveness. Go in peace.