

Lessons in Luke: Gratitude-Fueled Worship

Luke 7:36-50

Jeff Marian

Imagine that you're throwing a dinner party for someone famous, someone everyone knows and admires.

You're pretty excited about this event and want it to be both perfect and impressive, and so you plan all the details. You invite all your closest friends to enjoy the opportunity to rub shoulders with this celebrity.

The day of the party finally arrives. The guest of honor is seated at the table and your friends are engaged in conversation with him. Everything is going beautifully until there's a knock at the door. You find that strange because everyone you've invited has already arrived. When you open the door you suddenly feel a bit queasy. There, at your doorstep, is your neighbor, John. You don't like John. John is awkward and loud. He lacks a few filters; says and does inappropriate things, and makes others uncomfortable. And to make matters worse, John is wearing his swimsuit and no shirt. Before you can tell him that now is not a good time, he pushes past you and walks into your house saying, "I saw all the cars out front and didn't want to miss the party!"

How are you feeling in that moment?

If you can imagine how you'd feel in that moment, you might be able to relate to a Pharisee named Simon in today's Scripture reading from Luke 7, verses 36-50. Let's listen to the story now:

One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and took his place at the table. 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 ointment. 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 ointment.

Now when the Pharisee who had invited Jesus saw it, he said to himself, "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."

Jesus spoke up and said to him, "Simon, I have something

to say to you." "Teacher," he replied, "speak."

"A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he canceled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?" Simon answered, "I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt." And Jesus said to him, "You have judged rightly."

Then turning toward the woman, he 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. 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. Therefore, 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."

Then he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?" And he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

If you've been following along in our worship series on Luke's Gospel, you might have noticed a pattern in the last few weeks: Jesus turns everything upside down. He blesses the down and out and curses the rich and the reputable. He calls his followers to love and bless their enemies and refuse to judge their neighbor. He holds up a Roman soldier as an example of what it means to have faith. And here, in this story, that pattern of turning things upside down continues. Let's take a closer look.

Simon is a Pharisee. He is a respected leader in the community. Pharisees get a bad rap in the Gospels, but their goal wasn't to be self-righteous jerks. They loved God and they loved the nation of Israel. They believed that if the people obeyed the law, God would bless the nation, and since the nation was currently occupied by the Romans, the Pharisees were intent upon restoring obedience to the Law so that God would restore the nation to freedom and blessing. In first century Judaism, Simon is one of the "good guys."

And then there's the unnamed woman. She barges into the dinner party, much like your neighbor, John, in our scenario earlier, and she breaks all the rules. It's bad enough that she's a female in a "men's only" gathering, but she isn't just any woman. She is a "known sinner"

and everything she does proves it. She shows her hair – a first century no-no. She touches Jesus' feet, washes them with her tears, and anoints them with oil. This is nothing less than scandalous and a complete disgrace. In first century Judaism, she is a villain.

But once again, Jesus turns it all upside down. Simon was a "good guy" because he obeyed the law, but in the Kingdom of God, obedience is more than just doing the right thing, it's a matter of the heart. And Jesus reveals that beneath Simon's fancy clothes and pious behavior is a man with a heart problem. He didn't show Jesus any hospitality because he thought himself better than others. He doesn't see his own sins clearly, but he certainly sees the sins of his uninvited guest.

The unnamed woman, on the other hand, was a "villain" because she broke the law, but Jesus says that there are things that matter every bit as much as obedience – things like love and gratitude. This woman knows she's a sinner. She knows that she has much to be forgiven for, and she is overwhelmed with gratitude for the forgiveness that she's received from Jesus. Grateful enough to barge into a gathering where she knows that she isn't welcome and do things that she knows she will be judged for. And Jesus lifts up this unnamed woman, and puts Simon in his place.

And so once again, in this story Jesus turns things upside down. But enough about Simon and this unnamed woman. What does this story mean for us? I think that Luke is inviting us to see both the Simon and the unnamed woman in each of us, thereby turning some things in our lives upside down.

You see, I'm a little Simon, and so are you. We judge others, and we often judge ourselves as more righteous or less sinful than others. As I wrote this section of this sermon, I was sitting at an airport gate waiting for a flight. A young man walked by with his pants hanging so far below his waistline that I could tell you both the color and the brand of his underwear. You know what I'm talking about. You've seen it. And I became aware of the stories I was immediately telling myself about the kind of person he was, not unlike the way that Simon judged that unnamed woman. And in that moment it was as if God whispered in my ear, "Do you really think I care more about the way a man wears his pants, or the way he judges another human being? Do you really think you're more righteous because you wear your pants differently?" Yep, I'm a little Simon, and so are you.

And so, I'm asking the Holy Spirit to keep the truth of 1 Samuel 16 in front of me, "The Lord doesn't see things the way that you see them. People judge by outward appearance, but the Lord sees the heart."

But here's the pivot. Here's where this story gets traction in me. I don't just want to be less like Simon; I want to be more like the unnamed woman. Not in her disobedience, whatever that was in her life. No, I want to be more like her in her keen awareness of her need for grace and forgiveness. And then, like her, I want to be aware, to allow that awareness to give birth to a passionate hunger to come to Jesus, to weep not just over my brokenness and disobedience, but with deep gratitude for the gift of God's grace and forgiveness.

Have you ever seen a child dance in the rain, splashing in the puddles, giggling with abandon? Or a couple reunited at an airport, so lost in the joy of being together again that they weep freely and don't care who sees them? Or how about someone in a car at a stoplight, singing a favorite song at the top of their lungs because they don't think anyone can see them? That's the way I want to worship.

Let's be honest, friends. So often we come to worship to get something out of it, and we judge it based on whether we liked it or not, whether it spoke to us or not. There's nothing wrong with getting something out of worship, nor is there anything wrong with having personal preferences, but today's scripture reading reminds us that, ultimately, God is the focus of our worship. We come to this time as broken sinners in need of forgiveness, in need of being reminded just how loved, how blessed we are by God. And so we come not just to receive, but even more to pour out our praise and thanksgiving, just as that unnamed woman did.

So, here's what we're going to do. We're going to enter into a time of confession, to be honest with God about the truth, not just of our behavior but of our hearts. Because until we know just how much we've been forgiven, we'll never know just how much we have to celebrate. So let's join together now in this confession.

God of grace, You asked for our hands that You might use them for Your purposes. We gave them for a moment, and then withdrew them for the work was hard.

You asked for our mouths to speak out against injustice. We gave You a whisper that we might not be accused of not caring.

You asked for our eyes to see the pain and poverty of this world. But we closed them because we did not want to see.

You asked for our hearts that You might love our neighbors through them. But our hearts were too calloused to care.

You asked for our lives that Your Kingdom might expand through them. We gave a small part so that we might not get too involved.

Lord, forgive our lukewarm faith and our half-hearted obedience. Forgive our calculated efforts to serve You only when it's convenient...only in places where it is safe...only when You make it easy.

Lord, forgive us and renew us. Take our brokenness and make us whole again.

Friends, now hear the good news. Through the grace of our Lord, Jesus Christ, your sins have been forgiven. The slate of your past has been wiped clean for a new future. The burden of your guilt and shame has been lifted so that you might dance with joy. The ugliness of sin has been transformed into the beauty of restoration. In Christ, you and I are made new.

Jesus said that there is more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 who believe they don't need to repent. Let's make our worship a reflection of that heavenly celebration. Let's freely express the joy of being forgiven, the wonder of being renewed, the marvel of new life in Christ. Celebrate and sing.

And I want to challenge you to worship like the unnamed woman, like a child dancing in the rain, unafraid of what anyone else thinks and fully aware of what God deserves. Sing with gusto, even if you've been told that you can't carry a tune in a bag. Clap your hands, raise them up. Dance if the Spirit moves your feet. Why? Because our debt has been canceled. Our sin has been forgiven. The slate has been wiped clean. And that, my friends, is worth weeping with joy over and dancing with celebration.