

*Scandalous Love – Luke 7:36-8:3 – Rev. Drew Henry*  
**June 17, 2007 - First Presbyterian Church – Birmingham, Alabama**

We continue our journey through the Gospel of Luke. Luke is a phenomenal storyteller, and we have a phenomenal story today. Earlier in chapter 7 Jesus' power and legitimacy have been established through the blind receiving their sight, the lame walking, the lepers being cleansed, the deaf hearing, the dead being raised and the poor having the good news brought to them. And Christ says, "Blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me." (Luke 7:22-23)

Yet there is always someone who takes offense, and the religious leaders of Jesus' time were offended – for Jesus' actions and authority put into question their own. Luke says that "by refusing to be baptized by (John the Baptist), the Pharisees and the (experts in religious law) rejected God's purpose for themselves." (Luke 7:30)

Well our story today begins with one of these Pharisees inviting Jesus over to his home for dinner. Jesus had been accused of eating with all types of people, and he too accepted this invitation and took his place at the table.

Here is where our story takes its first turn. While Jesus was reclined at the table, as would have been customary for the day, a woman appeared at his feet. Luke identifies her not by name but as a woman in the city who was a sinner. The story says she had heard that Jesus was eating in the Pharisee's home. And she came prepared and appeared at Jesus' feet with an alabaster jar of ointment.

This woman proceeded to weep, and her tears were in such abundance that they began to bathe Jesus' feet. What the others at the Pharisee's table must have been thinking? Who is this woman, and what does she have to do with this man? Not only was she washing his feet with her tears, she began to dry them with her hair and kiss them with her lips. She then anointed his feet with the ointment she had brought with her, obviously for a very specific purpose.

The sensuality of this encounter was surely not missed by the Pharisee and his other guests at the table. If the same were to happen to any of us as a guest at another's table, surely we would be embarrassed. The Pharisee obviously thought Jesus should have been.

Luke tells us when he saw what had happened, the Pharisee said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, surely he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him." And although the Pharisee said nothing to him, Jesus spoke up and called him by name, "Simon, I have something to say to you."

Here begins the second turn. Jesus sets the trap with a story of his own. Two men were in debt to a creditor, one owing almost two month's wages and the other ten times that. When neither of them could pay, he canceled both of their debts. Now which of them will love him more?" (Luke 7:41-42) Although the answer is obvious, Simon responds, "I *suppose* the one who was forgiven the most."

Jesus replied, "You are right." Now pay attention to the detail. Then turning *to the woman*, he spoke *to Simon*, "Do you see this woman?" "Do you...see...this woman?" Now this is the same woman who at the Pharisee's table right in front of him had just poured out scandalous love on Jesus' feet, washing them with her tears, drying them with her hair, kissing them with her lips and anointed them with her own hands using the ointment she had brought. They had seen her only as "sinner," yet Jesus asks Simon, "Do you see this woman?"

It was she who bathed and dried my feet, with her own tears and hair, yet you, Simon the Pharisee, a religious leader, my host, the one who invited me to this your table, did not even offer me water for my feet when I entered your house. (*You have to love the tact that Jesus uses.*) You gave me no kiss, not even a greeting, a welcome, but from the time I arrived this woman hasn't quit kissing my feet. You, my host, did not anoint my head with oil, yet she (whom you question and look down upon) brought her own ointment into your home to anoint my feet. 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." Boom...

Does this mean the Pharisee had few sins of his own to be forgiven? No. Does this mean

the woman loved because she had been forgiven? I don't think that's what it says either. This woman acknowledged her need for forgiveness and recognized Christ as one who forgives, and it's from the realization of that deep love that her tears flowed and led her to fall at Jesus' feet. Her love and Christ's love were scandalous. Who was she to bow down to Christ? And who was he to see and welcome this woman who had been identified first and foremost as a sinner?

Just two weeks ago Scott Clark stood here in this pulpit and preached another sermon about Jesus' practice of hospitality at the table. Today we find Jesus once again at table, and he flies in the face of the social conventions of his time. He lifts up this woman, whom the Pharisee had identified as a sinner, and exalts her acts of hospitality over and above the hospitality (or lack thereof) of a socially recognized religious leader who had invited Jesus into his own home.

One commentator said Jesus is "interesting" to Simon. After all he invited him into his own home and engaged him in dialogue at his table. Yet the hospitality he offered is grounded in his own self interest. He wanted to know *about* Jesus. On the other hand the woman's hospitality is all about Jesus. Her acts of love are grounded in God's love for her, in the forgiveness she had been given, and she wanted to bow down at Jesus' feet, not merely learn more about him.

Where do *we* stand? Unfortunately it's been said that Simon's story is often the church's story. First off, we are often not aware of our own real need for forgiveness nor are we deeply aware of the reality of the forgiveness we have been given through Jesus Christ. At the same time, we too, like Simon, often sit at places of comfort, already having been welcomed at the table and look with disdain and disbelief at *the others* who are not welcome. We can do so because, like this woman in Scripture, we often only see *the others* through a narrow lens of sin without ever even really knowing their name.

Two weeks ago Scott Clark shared with us stories of how men and women who are gay have been hurt by the church and have left because they have not been fully welcomed. And they are not the only ones. There were and are times when people have not been or are not welcomed into the church and into positions of church leadership because of race, gender, marital status, sexual orientation, age, economic status, mental illness, addiction and the list goes on. Still all the while Luke holds up to us here in his gospel two contrary examples of welcome extended to an unnamed woman. Simon welcomes her with judgment, and Jesus welcomes her with grace.

Luke also holds up two contrary models of hospitality extended to Jesus. The hospitality extended by Simon, who loved little, and the extravagant (scandalous) hospitality extended by the woman, who shows great love in this story. What's more important my friends? Doing what "appears to be right," in order to meet the religious and social norms of our time, or doing what we somewhere deep down sense is right, although it may break social and religious norms of our time (and we may not fully understand it).

I opt to err on the side of scandalous, abundant love, and not to risk being seen by Christ as a person who loves little. My fear is that if we neglect to extend hospitality to others, we, like Simon, run the risk of failing to extend hospitality to Christ himself. In my heart of hearts, deep down inside I believe that at the feet of Jesus we are all equally sinners before Christ equally in need of God's grace and forgiveness. And I believe the Good News of the Gospel is that in Jesus Christ, we have been welcomed with arms wide open and we are all forgiven.

Our story ends – but those who were at (Simon's) table with him began to say among themselves, "Who does he think he is, forgiving sins!" He (Jesus) ignored them and said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you. Go in peace." (Luke 7:49-50 – The Message) Shalom!

May the same be said to us and to all who enter this place seeking Jesus Christ, "Your faith has saved you. Go in peace. Shalom!"