

“EXTRAVAGANT LOVE”

Reading: Luke 7:36-50

THIS MORNING’S GOSPEL lesson is one of the most touching, as well as one of the most telling stories in the New Testament. It tells us a lot about love, a lot about forgiveness, and a lot about Jesus. The same story appears in Matthew and Mark, as well as in John, although in a somewhat different form. The fact that this passage appears in all four Gospels is not only rare but also an indication of how highly the early church must have regarded it.

The situation was this. A Pharisee named Simon invited Jesus for dinner. Why he did so isn’t exactly clear. While it’s true that most of the Pharisees disagreed with Jesus that wasn’t the case with all of them. Perhaps Simon was curious about Jesus. Perhaps he wanted to trick Jesus into saying something that could later be used against him. We will never know the exact reason because the scriptures don’t tell us. They only tell us that a woman, a notorious sinner, heard that Jesus was eating at Simon’s house. When she saw Jesus she began to weep. She used her tears to wash his feet and unbundled her hair to wipe them dry. Outraged, Simon said, “If this man were a prophet, he would have known what kind of woman this was who was touching him.” But Jesus rebuked him with a story about a creditor who had two debtors, getting him to agree that it would be the one who owed more who would be the most grateful if his debt was cancelled.

Jesus of course, knew exactly what kind of person this woman was. She was a prostitute, an outcast (John’s Gospel identifies her as Mary, undoubtedly Mary Magdalene). She was someone who was considered totally unclean by the Pharisees. Still, she had shown Jesus compassion and love, which was more than his rigid, self-righteous host had done. After all, it was the custom in ancient Palestine to wash the feet of one’s guests and to greet them with a kiss. Why hadn’t this Pharisee? Jesus said to him, “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” (or as Eugene Peterson translates it *The Message*, “If the forgiveness is minimal, the gratitude is minimal.”).

A common misconception about church is that it exists for people of sterling character. In fact, nothing could be further from the truth. Abigail Van Buren once said, “The church is a hospital for sinners not a museum for saints.” The Pharisee in today’s Gospel reading thought of religion as a museum for saints rather than a hospital for sinners. It was unthinkable to him that a spiritual leader like Jesus would forgive a prostitute, but the truth is he had a lot more empathy for her situation than he did for the Pharisee’s and it’s easy to see why. Sinful though she may have been, the woman was grateful for every scrap of forgiveness she could glean, while the Pharisee, by considering himself incapable of sinning, showed himself to be the one who was most in need of spiritual help.

Here at First Church we like to talk about being “extravagantly welcoming,” but what we have in today’s Gospel reading is a case of a woman who was “extravagantly loving.” When she saw Jesus she held back nothing—not her feelings, not her tears, and not her expensive ointment. But then again, how can you ever put a price on forgiveness? How can you put ever price on what God has done for us? A story is told about the time James Denny, a British cleric, climbed up into the pulpit, lugging a life-sized eight-foot-tall cross. He stood it up and pointed to it, shouting, “All this he has done for us! Can we hold back? Can we hold back?”

The woman in this woman’s Gospel lesson couldn’t hold back and neither could Jesus. From the moment she saw him she couldn’t help but shower him with tears of gratitude and affection. And just as she could not withhold her love, neither could Jesus withhold his forgiveness. In the same way she anointed his feet with her ointment, he anointed her soul with his forgiveness.

Sadly, all this was lost on the Pharisee, who was so concerned about social convention and religious tradition that he failed to grasp the significance of the moment. The truth of the matter is that God doesn't care so much about what we have done; he only cares about what we are capable of becoming.

We know what became of Mary Magdalene. She ended up following Jesus. We don't know what became of Simon the Pharisee. But we can guess. He probably ended up feeling sorry for himself—sorry that he hadn't done more with his life; sorry that he didn't follow Jesus; sorry that he had mistaken the letter of the law for the spirit of the law.

Two hundred years ago, when the Congregationalists founded the American Board for Foreign Missions some of the missionaries traveled throughout New England visiting local churches and raising money. One morning after they made their appeal, a young woman from Massachusetts put five dollars and a note in the offering plate. The note said, "I give five dollars and myself."

My kind friends and gentle hearts, if God has not held back any of his love for us, what right do we have to withhold any of our love from him?

“Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were a present far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.”

Richard Hanna Huleatt

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