



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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You Gave Me No Water for My Feet Luke 7:36-50

Fr. William Klock

June 22, 2014 – Trinity 1

In last week's lesson we saw John sending his disciples to Jesus to ask him if he was really the Messiah who was to come, or if he should look for someone else. The irony of it was that when they approached Jesus to ask him the questions, they had to interrupt him as he was doing all the things the prophets had said the Messiah would do: healing the lame, giving sight to the blind, preaching good news to the poor. John and many of the Jews were so stuck on *their* vision of the Messiah that they were blind to Jesus even as he was fulfilling the prophets.

Luke carries on now, showing us how the people around Jesus were blind to him in other ways. They had their own ideas of the kingdom and were offended by Jesus as he upset them. They expected a Messiah who would come to judge sinners; instead Jesus was healing them, forgiving them, and giving them *shalom*. These stories should serve as a warning to us not to fall into the same trap and becoming blind to grace or taking Jesus for granted.

The next part of Luke's Gospel, 7:36-50, seems to follow where the first part of the chapter left off. Jesus is still in the town of Nain and a man named Simon, a Pharisee, invites him to dinner. This would have been a common thing for a wealthy person in the town to do. Jesus probably preached in the synagogue and so Simon invited him to a banquet in his home, where Jesus could discuss his teaching that day with other leaders from the synagogue. For Simon it

could easily have been a sign of prestige to have a well-known travelling preacher in his home—something to impress his friends. But from what little Luke tells us, it really does seem that Simon had an appreciation for Jesus. At the very least, he had an open mind and was willing to give Jesus a certain measure of honour. He addresses him as “Rabbi” and, at least at first, accepted him as a prophet. Lots of people have rejected Jesus outright, but Simon is at least willing to give him a hearing. Look at verses 36-38:

One of the Pharisees asked him to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table. And behold, a woman of the city, who was a sinner, when she learned that he was reclining at table in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster flask of ointment, and standing behind him at his feet, weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears and wiped them with the hair of her head and kissed his feet and anointed them with the ointment.

Imagine a dinner of respectable church-people as they sit around the table, listening to a prestigious guest preacher and asking him questions about the sermon he'd preached that morning. That's the modern equivalent to Simon's banquet. The two big differences between our modern scene and the one Luke paints for us is that Simon's guests would have been reclining on couches, their hands and mouths close to the table and their feet extending back behind them. It was also common for wealthy people—especially when throwing a party like this—to leave their doors open. Other guests could come in from the street to sit around the edges of the room to hear the discussion. Beggars would sometimes make their way in too, looking for scraps and leftovers. And so it's not unusual that a woman would come in uninvited and sit at the end of Jesus' couch, near his feet.

The scandal lay in who she was and what she did for Jesus. Luke doesn't tell us outright that this woman was a prostitute, but everything she does and everything said about her tells us that this was her profession. And that means that had it not been for Jesus being there, this woman would *never* have dared to enter Simon's house. This was a banquet of respectable “church people”, if you will, and she was about as far from that as was possible. She was a sinner, she was unclean, and she may even have been a gentile. And in that small town, everyone knew who she was. As Luke tells the story, he gives us this image of dramatic contrasts: again, good “church people” at their expensive and well-mannered banquet and then this woman—a prostitute—an outsider slipping in to upset and ruin everything. Luke's setting us up—and Jesus is setting Simon up—as he gets ready to turn the tables. Good Jews had a very clear understanding of God's kingdom: it was made up of good, circumcised, kosher-eating, *torah*-keeping people like themselves. In fact, they were in an exile of sorts—God had left them—because they hadn't been faithful enough at keeping *torah* and the Pharisees were the ones calling for everyone to do a better job so that God would come back to them, and especially so that he'd be able to recognise his own when he did return to judge the world. There was no room for a woman like this in their vision of the kingdom. She was very much on the outside. She was the problem; she was what was wrong with the world. But this night she managed to slip in.

As we read the story, think of how often we respond to “sinners”. We have a vision of the kingdom as a bunch of good and morally upright church-people. And that's not all bad, just as it wasn't all bad for the Pharisees. But how do we respond when an outsider, when a sinner, when an “unclean” person slips in? Sadly, we often get upset. Outsiders need to stay on the outside where they belong! Some of their sin, their dirt, their

unrighteousness might rub off on us. And yet the real kingdom—the one Jesus established—is just the opposite. It welcomes in the outsiders and offers them forgiveness and healing. Remember, Jesus embraced the leper, he touched the dead body, he ate with unclean people and never once worried about becoming unclean himself. Just the opposite, his health, his cleanness, his life transferred to the outsiders. He can still do the same through us.

Back to the banquet: This woman doesn't just slip in to sit quietly in the corner to listen to Jesus. She goes right up to the couch where he's resting and she starts doing something with his feet. She's got an expensive alabaster flask full of perfumed oil. She's there to anoint Jesus' feet, but before she can get the stopper out of the bottle she begins to sob. Her tears drip all over Jesus' feet. She feels foolish. She's got nothing to dry them with and so, forgetting the social customs for good, upstanding women, she lets down her hair and begins to dry his feet with it. But she doesn't stop there. After drying her tears from Jesus' feet—again forgetting social propriety—she kisses them as she anoints them with her perfumed oil.

Jesus' host, Simon, watches this from across the table and as he watches becomes outraged at what he's seeing—not only in his own home, but with this famous preacher whom many are hailing as the Messiah permitting and taking part in it. Luke writes:

Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner." (Luke 7:39)

Notice that Simon doesn't say anything out loud. Luke reports what's going through his head as his outrage grows. He had been open to

the idea that Jesus was a prophet, but now he's given up on that. From his vantage point across the room, all he can see is scandal. In a small town, everyone probably knew this woman and her reputation. If they didn't know her, the fact that she removed her veil and let down her hair, the fact that she was kissing Jesus' feet, and her little flask of eau-de-harlot gave it away. Clearly Jesus wasn't a prophet. This woman was a sinner. She was unclean. The Messiah would never let a woman like that touch his feet—by all rights now he was unclean—and if Jesus were really a prophet, really the Messiah, he should know who and what she is. The Messiah would have sent her packing with strong words of judgement and condemnation!

And Jesus answering said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." And he answered, "Say it, Teacher." (Luke 7:40)

Even though he's seething and doubting inside, Simon still puts on a good outward show—still addresses Jesus respectfully as "Teacher", "Rabbi". And Jesus tells him a parable. Look at verses 41-42:

"A certain moneylender had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he cancelled the debt of both. Now which of them will love him more?"

It's not hard to understand the point of Jesus' parable. Not long ago I went to Tim Horton's with some friends after lap-swimming. When we got there I realised that I'd forgotten my wallet. One of my friends bought my coffee. A couple of days later I tried to hand him a couple of dollars and he refused. I was grateful and I said, "Thank you". And I really was thankful. But it was just a cup of coffee. We've all been there. Now, for comparison, imagine the thanks you'd feel—and the much bigger and more proportionate appreciation you'd show—if someone

paid off your several-hundred-thousand-dollar mortgage or gave you an equivalent sum to bail out your failing business to save you from bankruptcy. That's what Jesus is getting at. But remember how much the society of Jesus' world was built on the idea of obligation and patronage. *Everybody* owed something to everybody else. Everyone was obligated to everybody else. Simon was throwing a banquet. It fulfilled an obligation to some of his guests while putting others in his debt. Forgiveness was not a concept that came easily to those people. Too much forgiveness, too much debt cancelling, and the whole system would come crashing down. When the Lord had given the law through Moses, it included instructions for the cancelling of debts. Every fiftieth year was supposed to be a year of "jubilee"—all debts were cancelled, slaves were set free, property was returned to the original owner. But as far as we can tell, the year of jubilee was never consistently observed—maybe not even observed at all. It was too upsetting to the ways of the world. So the idea of a forgiven debt was very dear to those people. And Jesus talking about forgiven debts went beyond the hypothetical situation of a parable. Remember that he came to preach release to the captives. When he talks in his parable about a moneylender, he's talking about the Lord. And when he talks about two forgiven debtors, he might as well be pointing one finger at Simon and the other at the woman sitting at his feet. Simon was a good man. He was an Israelite. He bore God's covenant sign of circumcision in his flesh and as a Pharisee he showed his commitment to God by living in obedience to *torah*. He'd heard John's call to repentance and maybe he'd even been baptised by John. That he invited Jesus into his home suggests that he might have been ready to identify himself with Jesus as the Messiah. But only so long as Jesus worked through the right channels and backed the system of

torah. Simon knew he sometimes sinned and needed forgiveness, but he also knew that forgiveness came through the priests and the temple and the sacrificial system. Jesus couldn't just throw out God's forgiveness willy-nilly! But then there's the woman. She lived a life of deliberate and overt sin. There was no hope for her in the temple or the *torah*. Sacrifices were for inadvertent, not wilful sin. If there was a poor woman in Israel, she was exemplified by this woman. Not many turned to prostitution willingly. She may have been a slave or the daughter of a poor man who couldn't pay his debts, sold into prostitution. She may have been a widow with no other source of support. But somewhere along the way she had heard Jesus' message. To her it was truly "good news"—impossible news, even. And she had repented and experienced the forgiveness he offered. She had been an outsider with no hope; now she found herself on the inside—visited by God—and she was thankful and grateful and full of love for the one who had welcomed and forgiven her. And more than anything she wanted to show her love. And so she came and did the only thing she knew to do. She took her perfume—her eau-de-harlot—the most costly thing she had from a profession she'd just given up and she used it to anoint Jesus' feet. She came into this gathering of upright covenant people to do it. She didn't know all the rules. Her makeup was a little overdone, her skirt a little too short and her heels a little too high. She didn't think before unveiling herself and letting her hair down. And that's all that Simon and his friends saw: a prostitute. But as Jesus could see into Simon's heart, he could also see into the woman's. He saw past her not knowing the rules and saw that what she did for him she did because her heart was overflowing with loving gratitude for the debt he had cancelled.

Jesus asked, "Which will love him more?" And Simon responds with the obvious answer:

"The one, I suppose, for whom he cancelled the larger debt." And [Jesus] said to him, "You have judged rightly." (Luke 7:43)

And now Jesus really turns the tables and puts Simon on the spot.

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 wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment." (Luke 7:44-46)

Simon's been a poor host. Hospitality was a vital part of that culture and it was expected that when a guest entered a house and took off his sandals, a good host or his servant would wash his dusty feet, maybe even anointing them with some olive oil. It was normal for a host to greet his guests with a kiss. And now Jesus draws Simon's attention to the woman at his feet and makes a point of how Simon has neglected him. Jesus had overlooked Simon's neglect. Maybe Simon was occupied when Jesus arrived and somehow the usual customs of hospitality were forgotten. Jesus was willing to overlook it. But now he points to it to highlight the difference in attitude between Simon and this woman. Simon was happy to have Jesus in his home—a prominent preacher to impress his friends, a lively dinner guest, a curiosity because he was a prophet. But Simon didn't go out of his way to show Jesus his gratitude. Jesus came to preach good news to the poor, release to the captives, and sight to the blind. He came to bring outsiders inside. But Simon was rich, free, and had his

sight—he was already on the "inside" and so he didn't appreciate or fully understand Jesus' ministry. The woman, however, has been set free. She'd been invited inside. And as a result she *understood* what Jesus was all about. She wasn't interested in the rules; she was interested in Jesus. And because of what he'd done, she was *overflowing* with gratitude and with love.

This was what Simon and the rest of Israel needed to understand. They knew that they were living in exile—living apart from God's presence—because of sin. Simon and his fellow Pharisees were committed to calling Israel away from sin and compromise in the hope that their obedience would prompt God to return. And they were right as far as that went. But what they missed was that God wasn't going to return as a new King David to reign from the temple and destroy all his enemies. Yes, something like that would happen *someday* at the end of history. But as Bp. Wright puts it, in Jesus God came not to the end of history, but into the middle of it. He came to make an offer of gracious restoration so that humanity could avoid judgement on that last day. And so Jesus came into the world, he bypassed Jerusalem and the priests and temple, and he established his kingdom amongst the poor, the sick, the unclean, the gentiles, the outsiders. It was his way of proclaiming that healing and forgiveness and membership in the kingdom are not found in a specific people or nation, in things, or in rules, but in him—in a person who has come to fulfil God's promise to Abraham to bless the nations and to set his whole creation to rights. Simon didn't yet understand, but this woman did and so she did what Simon neglected. She washed Jesus' feet with her tears, kissed them, and anointed them with the most valuable thing she had. And even without prophetic sight, Jesus could see her heart. He could see the love for him in her tears and in her actions.

Her love was the evidence of her faith. And that highlights the lack of love on Simon's part. His lack of faith was evident in his lack of love. And so Jesus says:

Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven—for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little.” And he said to her, “Your sins are forgiven.” Then those who were at 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.” (Luke 7:47-50)

Great forgiveness produces great love in return and that great love is the evidence of faith in Jesus and his forgiveness. Brothers and sisters, is that kind of love evident in our lives? Can others see our faith in our love for Jesus? I think we often forget the magnitude of the grace God has forgiven us. Especially those of us who have grown up in the Church and in Christian families. We've never really done anything *really* bad. Were generally “good” people—like Simon. We've always been on the inside and so we don't really appreciate the depth of love that God has shown us in Jesus. And so we give him lip service when it comes to love, we're happy to sing a some songs about our love for him on Sunday mornings, we're happy to live by the “rules” we've been taught please God, but we hold onto our secret sins, we have our rival loves, we have our other commitments that take precedence. We invite Jesus into our homes, but we're so used to him being there, we've forgotten what he's truly done for us, that we don't think to give him a kiss of greeting or wash and anoint his feet.

And notice how outraged Simon's friends were at the forgiveness Jesus offered. “No, Jesus! You can't forgive her. She's unclean. She doesn't follow the rules. You can't just invite her in to be one of us!”

Brothers and sisters, how often do we do the same? How often are we offended by “sinners” in our midst? There are some people we'd rather see get their just deserts. We forget that Jesus came not to condemn, but to redeem from condemnation. We forget that we too have been forgiven, even if our sins weren't as bad. And in that we forget that in comparison to the perfect holiness of God, there's precious little difference between you and me and the worst sinners who have ever lived. But those people whose sins have so obviously put them on the outside—like the prostitute in Luke's Gospel—truly understand what it means to be on the outside, what it means to stand condemned, and as a result they know better than anyone what it means to be forgiven. And as a result, they show great gratitude. If we don't understand, if we've “always” been insiders like Simon, we would do well to meditate on the holiness of God and to remember that as sinners—big and small—we're all worthy of judgement. And that means all of us, if we are in Christ, have experienced grace and been forgiven a great debt. Considering even our small sins in light of God's holiness, we have all been shown great grace. God has poured out his love by giving himself as a sacrifice for our sins and our faith in Jesus ought always to manifest not in indifference at his presence with us, but in the great sacrificial love we show him in return.

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, teach us to never take your loving grace for granted. Keep before our eyes a vision of your holiness that we might never forget that by nature we are sinners worthy of death. Remind us never to look down on the sin of others in self-righteousness, but as we grow to understand the depths of your love, shown to us in Jesus Christ, teach us to love you and to show our love by reaching out to sinners with your good news. We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.