

“Anointed in Sin”

Luke 7:36-50

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On Friday, I had the pleasure of being a groomsman in one of my closest friend’s wedding. It was a beautiful ceremony followed by a fantastic reception. Being that this was my first time as a groomsman, I was unsure of how the festivities would go, however, being that I have been through my own wedding process, I was fairly certain I knew which parts would go smoothly and which parts would prove to be a bit more difficult. In drawing from this personal experience, I was certain that one of the more uncomfortable and awkward parts of the wedding would be where and how the bridal party would be seated for dinner. Would the groomsmen sit on one side with the bridesmaids on the other? Or would we be mixed together? Or perhaps there wouldn’t be a table for the bridal party at all? Honestly, regardless of how the seating arrangement would be organized, I was dreading, what I assumed, would be an assigned seating arrangement.

Sure enough, as we began to fall into our seating formation, I realized I had been awarded the awkward end seat. Away from the action, surrounded by people I did not know particularly well. “Oh no,” I thought to myself, “I’d much rather be sitting by such-and-such, they’re so much more fun.” I hunkered down, head hung and shoulders slouched, ate my food, engaged in lackluster small-talk and got up as soon as I could to be around the “action” that was taking place at the center of the table. Put simply, I sulked through the situation, certain that I should have been centrally located at the table, situated amongst the “fun” of familiarity.

As I read our text for today I could not help but think of this exact scenario. Simon has invited an esteemed guest, Jesus, to dinner. The seating arrangements have been neatly organized. He’s made sure that both he and Jesus are sitting at the center table in the middle of the action. The awkwardness of the end seat has been reserved for someone else to sulk through. The salads have been served, the main course is making its way out, the conversation is lively, and then it happens. An uninvited guest, a woman “who was a sinner,” unexpectedly interrupts the action. The scenario has shifted, the end seat, or, more accurately, the uninvited, has made its way to the middle.

Now, before we go any further, let’s step back from this scene for a moment to look briefly at the way this story appears in the other gospels. This

is a story that appears in all four gospels, but it appears in very different ways. In Mark and in Matthew's gospel this episode takes place two days before the Passover. As they tell it, Jesus was in Bethany at the home of a different Simon, Simon the Leper. The unnamed woman pours nard, a burial ointment, over the head of Jesus, anticipating his burial. In this story it is not the host but the disciples who are angry with the woman because she has wasted the expensive ointment. We are told nothing of her character but Jesus praises her and reminds us that "wherever the good news is proclaimed ... what she has done will be told in remembrance of her" (Mark 14:9). In John's gospel the moment takes place six days before the Passover. It also takes place in Bethany, but it is in the home of Lazarus who was recently brought back from the grave. And now it is Lazarus' sister Mary who anoints the feet of Jesus with the expensive nard and wipes his feet with her hair.

Certainly, our text today adds to the depth and breadth of which this story has already been expressed through the testimonies of Matthew, Mark, and John. The Lukan version of this story takes creative license to expand and amend the story. In so doing, our time at the table becomes a rich feast of grace, forgiveness, and gratitude.

And so the story moves forward and we find ourselves centrally located in the tension of this unnamed woman weeping and wiping Jesus' feet, anointing them with oil while Simon, annoyed and offended, thinks 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." That's an interesting shift in tone from last week's reading where it is proclaimed that Jesus is "a great prophet" that has "risen among us" (Luke 7:16).

While these words were not spoken out loud, Simon's face and body language certainly must have given him away – head hung and shoulder slouched, pouting as he watches this uninvited guest interact with Jesus. Noticing this, Jesus is careful to craft a response. He presents a parable to Simon, confronting his concerns about this woman's presence at their meal and her touching him. It is a simple parable about a creditor forgiving two debts. It is simple enough that when prompted to answer the parable, Simon answers it correctly. Yet, the answer seems smug and rather self-righteous, "I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt," he replies. It is almost as if his response to Jesus is, "Come on man, you've got to do better than that."

Challenge accepted. Jesus, recognizing that everyone is still not quite understanding his point, turns to the women, giving her praise and acclaim for her profound gestures of gratitude. Her actions, bathing, kissing, and anointing his feet, are all opportunities to express a deep love and radical hospitality. Simon and the rest of his guests missed the mark. In their concern to be in and with the action of middle of the table, they failed to acknowledge

their brokenness. They failed to acknowledge that in spite of their own sinfulness, they have been forgiven.

From this comes Jesus climatic and prophetic proclamation, “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” (Luke 7:47-48). Baffled by this response, unable and unwilling to make the connection between the parable and the actions of this woman, “those who were at the table with him” began to say to themselves, “Who is this who even forgives sins?” (Luke 7:49). Jesus responds a beautiful way, rather than continuing to engage with the other “invited” guests, he looks at the woman and says to her, “Your faith has saved; go in peace.”

As I was preparing and writing this week, I came across this question – As you receive this story, who do you think you are most like? Simon the Pharisee or the woman with the alabaster jar?

As I read and re-read this question, I couldn’t help but think about the ending of this story – “Who is this who even forgives sins?” Put in another way, “Who does Jesus think he is, going around forgiving people of their sins? Raising a widow’s son from death is one thing, but Jesus, forgiving sins? Nope. You’ve gone too far.”

Forgiveness is a funny thing. It stirs up deep and passionate emotions. It often brings to the surface painful memories. It requires us to re-evaluate and re-examine the hurt that has been done to us and the hurt we have done to others. Perhaps this is why the guests are so astonished by Jesus’ words. Is it not easier and more comfortable for all of us, myself included, to ignore our brokenness and our sinfulness? Rather than kneeling, weeping, wiping, and anointing, we often find ourselves fixated on fun and familiarity, comfortable with being contained to the center of the table, in the midst of all the action.

Some years back the Templeton Foundation funded a fascinating major nationwide study on people’s attitudes toward forgiveness. Co-sponsored by the University of Michigan and the National Institute for Mental Health, the study found that 75% of Americans are “very confident” that they have been forgiven by God for their past offenses. The lead researcher, Dr. Loren Toussaint, expressed great surprise at such high confidence, especially since many of these same people were not regular church attenders. Still, three-quarters of the people surveyed had few doubts about God’s liking to let bygones be bygones.

Yet, the picture was less bright, however, when it came to interpersonal relations. Only about half of the people surveyed claimed that they were certain that they had forgiven others. Most people admitted that whereas God may have forgiven us, ordinary folks struggle. It’s difficult to forgive other people with whom you are angry. It’s even difficult to forgive ourselves sometimes. But where forgiveness does take place, the study found a link

between forgiveness and better health. The more prone a person is to grant forgiveness, the less likely she or he will suffer from any stress-related illnesses.

So often, we're all too eager to interact with and where the action is, where it is comfortable and where we know everyone and everyone know us. Where forgiveness is forgotten and gratitude is given the end seat.

Yet, what would it look like if we all embraced the end seat? If we energetically and enthusiastically engaged with "sinners," acknowledged our brokenness, and anointed one another in our very sin, granting love, grace, and gratitude to one another might we find ourselves, as one psalmist suggests, surrounded in "steadfast love" where "God [is] a hiding place for [us]; preserv[ing] [us] from trouble; surround[ing] [us] with glad cries of deliverance" (Psalm 32:7,10).

When we come to the table unconcerned about where are sitting and who we are sitting with, we open ourselves up to the opportunity to both accept and extend forgiveness. In this spirit of humble gratitude, forgiveness is formed and fortified in a very real way. It is as Paul suggests to the church in Galatia, "If [we] build up again the very things that [we] once tore down, then [we] demonstrate that [we are] transgressor[s]" (Galatians 2:18). To take a posture of forgiveness is to take seriously the words we so often pray - "forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors." In forgiveness, we remember the promises of God's redemption, and the claims God has on all human life. The assurance of God's forgiving grace is declared in the name of Jesus Christ. We accept God's forgiveness, confident that in dying to sin, God raises us to new life.

So, I'll ask you - who is currently at the end seat of your table? Better yet, who has been uninvited to your table? Who have you not forgiven? Who have you not offered a gracious spirit of love and gratitude to? To whom have you failed to say sorry to?

Friends, the table has been set and the end seat is open. Are you prepared to sit down?