

“The Church At Its Best”
Texts: Psalm 32, Luke 7:36-50
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And he said to the woman, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.” Luke 7:50

And he told the crowds all these things in parables; without a parable he told them nothing. These words from the gospel of Matthew (13:34) provide an accurate summary of the preaching ministry of Jesus in the gospel of Luke. The third gospel is filled with these unique and perplexing stories. In Luke, Jesus teaches not in propositional assertions or creedal statements, but through the telling of stories. “Let me tell you a story: A sower went out to sow... A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho... There was a man who had two sons.”

The parable was such a powerful tool for Jesus because through it he could transform the perspective of his audience. Parables reframe our vision and give us new eyes to see some old supposed universal assumption. This is why stories can often reconcile enemies and change minds—they move beyond facts to relationships, and it is at the level of relationship that we are most vulnerable and open to change.

Throughout the season of Lent, we will be looking to the parables that Jesus tells in the Gospel of Luke for perspective and insight. My hope is that these stories will shake us up a bit in preparation for Easter Sunday, when all the world’s assumptions about the power and finality of death will be turned on their head.

As Will Willimon has written, “To be a Christian is, in part, to be reminded, on a weekly basis, that we are meant to look at the world with different standards of judgment than those that operate in the world.” [\[i\]](#)

Parables do exactly that. They reorient us to a different standard. They surprise us. They allow us to see clearly the difference between our lives: practical, moderate, rational, and the kingdom of God: extravagant, unrestrained, imprudent.

These outlandish stories often begin innocently enough. Some reasonable question is asked or request made. Everything seems neatly arranged and in its place. And then the story is told, and before it’s over all our spiritual furniture has been rearranged and we are aware of some new and potentially life-altering truth.

This morning's story begins with a dinner invitation offered to Jesus by a respectable, righteous, pure religious leader. There is nothing out of place about this request. The Pharisee, whose name is Simon, wants to have the new upstart Rabbi over to his house for dinner and conversation. Perhaps Simon had heard of the increasing popularity of Jesus, and the great crowds that followed him through the rural regions of Galilee. Earlier in this same chapter, Jesus raised the only son of a grieving widow from the dead, and then Luke tells us, "the word about Jesus spread throughout Judea and all the surrounding country." As a leader in the same field, Simon wanted to learn more. What better way to test the new young preacher than to have him over for dinner?

As is so often the case in the life of Jesus, the dinner is interrupted. A woman finds her way into the Pharisee's house. The woman does something very strange. Although this is not her home, she offers Jesus the customary rituals of hospitality: water for the feet, the kiss of welcome, anointing with oil. It is at this point that the conflict arises. Jesus does not expel this sinful woman from his presence. For Simon this is proof positive that he is not a holy man, a prophet. What kind of clergyperson would remain in the presence of such a sinful person? It is a question of purity!

The Pharisee's reaction reminds me of a conversation I once heard between a wise, old, retired minister and a young, fiery pastor who was sure he knew just about everything worth knowing. The young pastor, who had been spouting self-righteous platitudes nonstop during the car ride to the restaurant, throughout lunch at Cracker Barrel, and most of the way home, finally paused long enough to ask a question: "Don't you think that in order to be a minister you have to remove yourself from all sinfulness and become perfected?" The retired minister cracked a smile, "Well, son, from all I've heard today I'm afraid that would only leave God with one option—and that is **you!**" Simon wanted his religious leaders to know how to recognize and isolate themselves from sinful people.

If the story ended there, we might be tempted to view this as another example of the sharp contrast between Jesus and the religious leaders of his time. Here are two holy men in the presence of a sinful woman. The righteous Pharisee follows a theology of distance while Jesus moves toward the woman with forgiveness and acceptance. Not a bad interpretation of the narrative thus far.

But the parable changes our perspective. The comparison here is not between the responses of religious leaders to a sinful woman. The comparison instead highlights the differences between Simon and the woman in how they respond to holiness in their midst. The Pharisee is self-sufficient, righteous, and proper. He welcomes Jesus to his own home with a handshake and a nod—appropriate and restrained. The woman's response is radical, irrational, even embarrassing. The irony here is that the extravagant hospitality is not offered by the host but by an improper intruder whose very presence in this space is an affront to respectability.

The difference, which the parable will not let us forget, is that the woman's behavior is that of a person who has been forgiven. Forgiven.

Forgiveness is everywhere in the news these days. From the recall of millions of Toyotas to the massive burden of Haiti's national debt to the public apologies of promiscuous politicians and Tiger Woods just this past Friday, pleas for forgiveness are ubiquitous. Though the justifications are as varied as the topics of concern, there seems to be one common element uniting them all—whether it has its roots in Puritan Christianity, popular psychology or capitalist economics, it is the notion that we must earn forgiveness. It is rational, logical, fair, and just—in order to be forgiven, we must do something to **earn** it.

But this is a parable, and here comes the shift of perspective. Though verse forty-seven is awkward in some translations, the sense of the Greek is this: “And so, I tell you, her great love proves that her many sins have been forgiven.”^[ii] Just as in the parable of the debtors, where great love follows extravagant forgiveness, the woman's actions of hospitality follow her restoration; they are not the cause for it. Jesus here commends preemptive forgiveness as the pathway to greater love.

It is a peculiar and even irresponsible command. And it is one of the building blocks of the kingdom of God.

Samuel Wells has written, “If forgiveness makes you nervous, if you think it's all very well but you can't do it, if you feel you like the idea of it but actually taking the step of forgiving or asking forgiveness is just too much, then that's more than understandable. You're bound to be nervous. You're standing beside the greatest volcano of pent-up energy in the world.”^[iii]

Forgiveness is one of the most difficult and demanding spiritual challenges that we are given in the church. Forgiveness requires openness and honesty, it means not sweeping things under the rug or avoiding difficult conversations. Because open acknowledgment of sin is the first step toward forgiveness. The woman in Luke's gospel is all too aware of her sinfulness— she shows up at Simon's house uninvited and unwelcome, and she comes in search of an experience of grace and mercy. The moment at which she feels that forgiveness is not clear in the story, but what is clear is the promise of Jesus that she has been forgiven. It is almost as if the acknowledgement itself is the only prerequisite for forgiveness.

One of the most powerful examples of this came in the mid-nineties in South Africa with the establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. This group was a crucial player in that country's journey from apartheid to democracy. For months, the commission, chaired by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, heard the testimonies of both perpetrators and victims of violence and hatred. All witnesses were given the opportunity to share their stories, confess their sins, and ask for and offer forgiveness.

As Tutu himself has said, "Forgiveness doesn't mean trying to paper over the cracks, which is what people do when they say, 'Let bygones be bygones.' Because they will not. They have an incredible capacity for always returning to haunt you. Forgiveness means that the wronged and the culprits of those wrongs acknowledge that something happened. And there is necessarily a measure of confrontation."[\[iv\]](#)

And so all is not lost for the Pharisee. He need only acknowledge his deep need for forgiveness and accept that forgiveness; then he too will have found the pathway that leads to freedom.

In just a few moments, we will pray that most ancient, brief, and comprehensive of all prayers, the one we call the Lord's Prayer. Anyone who has worshipped in multiple settings will note the differences in translation when we come to the line about forgiveness. Presbyterians say, "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." Other denominations use different words, "sins, trespasses, transgressions, offenses." You may have heard that the reason Presbyterians say "debts and debtors" is because there was no greater sin to our Scottish forbears than being in debt. I think this morning's gives an even better justification for our use of debts and debtors. The great joy of forgiveness is that it frees us from obligation, either to guilt or to revenge. In his letter to the Romans, Paul writes, "Owe no one anything except to love one another" (Romans 13:8). When our debts and our debtors are forgiven, we are freed to extend hospitality and forgiveness to others.

Perhaps there is someone whom you have not forgiven. Maybe there is someone whose forgiveness you need. This morning's passage urges us not to delay, because there is freedom in forgiveness.

The story ends in a fascinating place. Jesus forgives the woman, praises her faith, and tells her to go in peace. But where should she go? How does her story end? Luke's story begs for a community of forgiven and forgiving people. The woman must find a community of acceptance and welcome. Where else but the church could she go? The church is in the business of forgiveness. And so I like to imagine this joyful and forgiven woman joining up with other disciples of Jesus and finding a home among them. I like to imagine her as an evangelist, a teacher, and a prophet. Restored and forgiven, she becomes a witness to others, maybe even to that Pharisee who is locked in a prison of righteousness and lacks the freedom of forgiveness.

The church of Jesus Christ is at its best when it is a forgiven and forgiving body. Forgiveness, like love, is not instinctual; it does not originate in the minds of human beings. We love, we forgive, because we have been loved and forgiven. And the more we trust that truth, the more we can live it out.

Let me tell you a story. A story of another time forgiveness made the front pages of our nation's newspapers. It was October of 2006 in the Amish community of Nickel Mines,

Pennsylvania. You remember the horrific events of the day; a one-room schoolhouse becomes the scene of a terrible crime, five young children murdered by a disturbed local man who then takes his own life. It was a story of immense and irreparable pain in a tranquil community committed to deep Christian faith and nonviolence.

The story might have ended there, in tragedy and senseless violence. But it did not. Days after the attack we learned more of the Amish community's reaction. The grandfather of one victim said to a reporter, "We must not think evil of this man; he had a mother and a wife and a soul." Amish neighbors comforted the family of the killer, with one Amish man holding his sobbing father in his arms for over an hour. About thirty members of the Amish community attended the shooter's funeral and his widow was invited to attend the service for the children. Later, she wrote an open letter to her Amish neighbors, "Your compassion has reached beyond our family, beyond our community, and is changing our world, and for this we sincerely thank you."

Some commentators criticized the swift and complete forgiveness, arguing that such forgiveness is inappropriate when no remorse has even been expressed. But local observers of Amish life had a different take. Forgiveness, they said, is a deeply-rooted Amish value, modeled after the forgiveness of Jesus himself, who said from the cross: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."^[v]

Such forgiveness does not undo the tragedy or justify the wrong, but constitutes the first step toward a more hopeful future.

In stark contrast to the usual media accounts of the church at its worst: exclusive, hostile, divisive, mean-spirited, this was a picture of the church at its best: a community of extravagant welcome and irrational forgiveness.

It was a story of love outlasting tragedy.

It was pain transformed into a parable.

^[i] Will Willimon, *Pulpit Resource* (September 2005).

^[ii] See Fred Craddock, *Luke: Interpretation Series*, Westminster John Knox Press, 1990. p. 106.

^[iii] Samuel Wells, "The Social Power of Forgiveness." Sermon preached at Duke Chapel on January 24, 2010.

^[iv] See profile of Archbishop Tutu at http://www.speaktruth.org/defend/profiles/profile_11.asp

^[v] Much of this information comes from reports of the *Lancaster Intelligencer Journal*, and from various other news sources, as well as information sent by members of my family who live in Lancaster County, PA.