

A Storytelling Commentary on Luke 7:36-8:3

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The story of the anointing of Jesus by a woman who came to dinner is present in all four of the Gospels. It is one of the most popular stories in the gospel tradition. Luke's version is highly distinctive. First of all, it is early in the Gospel rather than being associated with Jesus' passion, as in the other three Gospels. In Luke's version, the incident is a sign of Jesus' extraordinary ministry of compassion and love for sinners. Furthermore, the setting in Luke is unique. The story takes place in the home of a Pharisee, a seriously observant Jew, who wanted to honor Jesus and invited him to a banquet.

This banquet would have been a major social occasion. In the last part of the story it is clear that there were a number of people present at the dinner. It wasn't just Jesus and the Pharisee, it was a whole group of men who reclined for a banquet. There is some evidence to indicate that reclining only happened at major dinners like this. We're not sure, but at least it is an indication that this dinner was a major social occasion.

In telling the story you want to create an atmosphere of a big dinner. You can draw the scene by indicating that others are present around the table where they were reclining. The practice of reclining for dinner was that every person had a cushion that they would lean on. There was a table in the middle with various dishes that everyone could reach, so the heads of all the men were toward the center and their feet were out of the circle. Everyone in Luke's audience knew that framework for the dinner.

Now the woman came and is introduced immediately as "a woman in the city who was a sinner." What that means to Luke's listeners is that she was a prostitute. "A woman of the city who is a sinner" is code for a sex professional. She is described as having learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's house. This is an inside view of what she had learned. The impact of this inside view in the telling of the story is to lead the listeners into identification with her.

The woman's action is one of the most extravagant expressions of love anywhere in the Gospels. She brought an alabaster jar of ointment; she stood behind Jesus at his feet weeping; and then she knelt down and began to bath his feet with her tears and to wipe them with her hair. This implies that she let down her hair, which women only did in preparation for getting in bed with a man, usually her husband. Women let down their hair only in private, only in the context of the bedroom.

Everything in this description is profoundly sexual. Bathing his feet with her tears, wiping them with her hair, anointing his feet with the ointment she had brought, and kissing his feet are all associated with physical love. The sounds are luxurious in rhythm and tone. The story leads us as listeners into identification with what is happening and with her actions. There is no note of judgment or critique in what she is doing, but rather

delight in it. It is important in telling this part of the story to communicate fully her spirit of love for Jesus.

Simon the Pharisee sees what's going on and is offended. His tone is a righteous response of one who is witnessing a highly sensual action on the part of the woman. Jesus recognizes what Simon is thinking. Now once again it is important to present Simon's response as legitimate and sympathetic. There is no critique of Simon at this point. There is merely a description of what he is thinking. It is a description with which the audience is expected to identify. The extreme sensuality of the storyteller's description of the woman's action creates the credibility of Simon's response.

Jesus' response to Simon is addressed to the audience as if the audience were Simon the Pharisee. In telling the story you need to create a dynamic of identification first with the woman, and then with Simon. Jesus' response is to invite Simon into a rabbinic dialogue. So he begins, "Simon, I have something to say to you." And Simon replied, "Teacher, speak." This is a prelude to a rabbinic teaching. The introduction makes it clear that there is mutual respect between Jesus and the Pharisee. This is a discussion between two men, both of whom value the Torah and the spirit of the prophets. And given the setting—they are reclining, probably side by side—this is an intimate conversation.

Jesus' parable is also addressed to the audience as if the audience were Simon the Pharisee. It is told as a teaching story. It ends with Jesus asking, "Now which of them will love him the more?"

The amount of money that is involved in Jesus' parable may help to clarify what is at stake. In general, these financial calculations in Jesus' parable are based on the assumption that a denarius would be a working man's pay for a day's work. Therefore, 50 denarii would be a little more than two months of labor. 500 denarii, on the other hand, is nearly two years of work. For a working man, two years labor is what is implied in the difference between 50 denarii and 500 denarii. Luke's listeners would have recognized the forgiveness that is involved as a really big deal with 500 denarii, so tell it that way. You can consider, "What would two years labor be worth for me?" Just double your salary last year and that's the amount of money that you're describing here.

Simon's response is a respectful response: "I suppose it would be for the one for whom he canceled the greater debt." Jesus replies, "You've answered correctly," and then he turns to the woman. Now it's a little difficult to figure out how to do the motions of this in relation to the setting. Simon is either on the other side of the circle or he is next to Jesus, which is quite likely. Simon as the host would be reclining close to the guest of honor. You can imagine that Simon is at Jesus' right hand.

Jesus then leans back and invites Simon to look at the woman who is anointing his feet. The gesture is, "Simon, look at this woman" that is behind us, who is anointing my feet. The gesture implies a question: "Do you see her? Do you see this woman?" Jesus is not

just asking, "Can you look at her?" He wants to know, "Do you see her, do you see her spirit, do you perceive what is happening here?"

Jesus then describes the contrast between Simon's actions and the woman's actions. "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. And you did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment." This is an intimate conversation between Jesus and Simon. He is not criticizing Simon; he's rather identifying the difference between what Simon did, which is not unusual, and what the woman has done, which is extraordinary.

The norms of ancient Middle Eastern hospitality are in the background of this description. To extravagantly receive a guest is to do what Abraham did for the three men who came to his tent. He had his wife Sarah fix a great meal and he brought it to them. Simon's dinner is in that tradition of extravagant hospitality.

Jesus is drawing the contrast between Simon's response and the woman's. Simon has done well, but the woman has done **very** well according to the norms of hospitality. The heart of the story is then Jesus' conclusion, "Therefore I tell you Simon, her sins, which are many, have been forgiven because she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little." This is not a critique of Simon, it is simply a description of the facts of Jesus' relationship to Simon and to the woman.

One of the primary issues around the interpretation of the story is the meaning of the Greek word here *oti*, which is in the sentence "her sins, which are many, have been forgiven, *oti* she has shown a great love." In the NRSV, this word, usually translated as "for," is translated as "hence." The issue here is whether or not Jesus is saying, "Her sins are forgiven **because** she has loved much." Was it her love that generated the forgiveness or had she already been forgiven prior to this dinner and was expressing her gratitude for the forgiveness through her gestures of love?

Everything in the parable indicates the latter interpretation: the love of the one who had been forgiven the greater debt is in response to the forgiveness that he has received, which is overwhelming. The love that is generated is in response to forgiveness. From the parable then, the clear conclusion is that what Jesus means is that the woman's sins, which were many, had been forgiven beforehand, and that she is expressing her gratitude.

Whatever the interpretation, the interaction between forgiveness and love is made explicit in this story. It is similar to the Lord's Prayer. There is a relationship between forgiving others and being forgiven. The parable is about the difference in the depth of love from people who have been forgiven much versus those who have been forgiven little.

The dynamic of this story is to change one's perception of the woman and to celebrate her gestures of love. That is what happens at the end of the story. Jesus turns back and speaks to the woman directly—it may be that he sits up or that he brings the woman into the

middle of the circle. We can't know the specifics, but we do know that the gesture is one of intimacy. Jesus says to her, "Your sins are forgiven."

Then all those who are around the table say, "Who is this, that he can forgive sins?" This is the same as the response in Mark's story of the healing of paralytic where Jesus says, "Your sins are forgiven," and the scribes who are present say, "Who is this man who forgives sins? No one can forgive sins but God." Everyone would have known that. Jesus does not answer their question. Instead he focuses on the woman and says to her, "Your faith has saved you, go in peace."

This saying at the end—"Go in peace"—is a traditional blessing usually shared between men. In this story Jesus announces to the whole group of men as well as specifically to her, "Your sins are forgiven," which also means, "You are now included in the community of the righteous." The sign of this inclusion of women in the community is developed in the next part of Luke's story (Luke 8:1-3) in which he talks about the women who traveled with Jesus and names them: women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities, Mary called Magdalene (not the woman who came and anointed his feet, in contrast to tradition), Joanna, Susannah and many others.

The conclusion of this story is the description of Jesus' band as including these women who were supporting him out of their own financial resources and were traveling with him. This in itself is a major surprise and was offensive to some in Luke's audience. What it indicates is the full inclusion of women in the band of Jesus' disciples. This may imply that the woman has been or will now become part of that group. This is one of the greatest stories in the gospel tradition and so I hope that you will be able to find a way of telling it that will render its full dynamics. It is truly a story of good news. Love trumps everything in God's game.