

LIBERATED WOMEN

Sermon, June 13, 2010

Text: Luke .7:36 – 8:3

Most of us think of Jesus traveling about the countryside with His twelve male companions, but Luke tells us there were a number of women in this entourage, as well. These are women, we are told, who had been cured, set free, from crippling diseases and crippling spirits by the ministry of Jesus. You might say these were liberated women before the term "liberated women" became fashionable. In Mary Magdalene's case, we are told Jesus liberated her from seven demons; no one knows for sure, but from the context some believe her to be the woman who crashed the Pharisee's dinner party in Luke 7. The second woman listed is Joanna, described as *"the wife of Cuza, the manager of Herod's household."* Herod, of course, was the king; Joanna evidently held significant social and political standing. Apparently she had also been healed, set free by Jesus, and now traveled with this company of women supporting His ministry. Note the extremes: Mary with the dark past, and Joanna the lady of the court, both in the same company ... tied together by the loving bonds of gratitude to Jesus Christ. There was also Susanna and "many others." Luke tells us *"these women were helping to support them out of their own means."* These liberated women supported the ministry of Jesus out of their own means because they were grateful.

Our lectionary reading began with Jesus at the home of a Pharisee whose name is Simon. We don't learn his name until later in the story ... I believe that's intentional, but I'm getting ahead of myself a bit. As a Pharisee, Simon is known as a good man with a good name in the community. We aren't told why Simon had Jesus to his home for dinner. As mentioned in the previous verses, one of the disparaging accusations made by the Pharisees against Jesus was that He was always eating with the sinners and publicans. Maybe, Simon reasoned, Jesus just wasn't getting any invitations to the right homes. Jesus did get to go to a lot of dinner parties; it's always been one of the benefits of being clergy.

In that day, if someone was coming to your home for dinner it was customary to show respect and courtesy through some basic hospitalities: you would make sure that as the guest arrived there would be water available to wash his feet, and the host would normally greet the guest at the door by kissing him on the cheek (much as we would give a welcoming handshake). The guest would then be offered a drop of fragrant anointing oil on the head. But here, apparently none of that happened. One can assume Simon didn't really hold Jesus in high esteem, as he apparently did not afford these common courtesies.

While they are in the midst of this dinner party, the most awkward thing happened. A woman who was known to have led a sinful life in town appeared out of nowhere. She came in, came up behind Jesus as He reclined at table, and stood there weeping. And as she wept, she let her tears fall on Jesus' feet. She then gently dried Jesus feet with her hair, kissed them, and then poured perfume on them. Now, we don't know much about this woman; all we are told is that she was a sinner. And apparently everyone knew that. It doesn't really matter exactly what her sin was. What is significant, though, is that, unlike the Pharisee Simon, this woman is given no name. It is as if her sin had become her identity. It's as if she is simply identified by what she has done wrong. She is "the sinner."

Simon seems particularly unimpressed by Jesus' reaction to all this. He mutters to himself, *"If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is. He would have known that she is a sinner."* In short, *"If he were a real prophet, he'd put that sinner in her place."* There's a bit of humorous irony in the text in that NOW we are given his name. Jesus addresses him by name. His name carries a bit of a pun ... the literal meaning of Simon is "God has heard." God in the flesh heard what Simon muttered, and then said, "Si-mon." *(as if to say, "God has heard that.")* "Simon, I have something to tell you." Jesus then tells a story. "Once upon a time there were two people who both owed a creditor more money than they were ever going to be able to pay back. One of these owed 500 day's wages. The other person owed 50 day's wages. Neither had any hope of paying him back, but in his mercy, the creditor cancelled both their debts. Now, who do you think loved the creditor the most?" Simon said, "I suppose it was the one who had the most forgiven." Jesus answers, "Right!" Then Jesus looks over at the woman and says, "Simon, do you see this woman?" And the reader almost has to interrupt and say, "No! Simon *doesn't* see the woman. Simon only sees the sinner. Jesus sees the woman."

Yes, Jesus sees the woman. Simon can only see the sinner; he can only "see" this person by what she had done wrong. Jesus sees the woman, the person. Forgiveness is not just Jesus' magnanimous

ability to overlook our faults; forgiveness is Jesus tenacious commitment to get down to the real person, the innately noble being God created and called good! He wants to address that person who has worth and dignity because she was created in the image of a worthy God! This woman has apparently encountered Jesus before; as mentioned, some think she was Mary Magdalene... whoever she is, this woman has obviously heard His gracious words before. She had taken them to heart. She experienced forgiveness, and in that gracious forgiveness she experienced a feeling of self-worth that had been crusted over by self-hatred for too long. And when she hears Jesus is coming to Simon's house, she just has to find a way to thank and honor this man who gave her such grace, so she comes and crashes the party. And unlike the religious host of the party, this woman treats Jesus as He should be treated.

No, Simon doesn't see the woman. He can only see the sinner. He doesn't see what Jesus sees. He has a hard time seeing grace at work. And all too often we don't see what Jesus sees. We have a hard time seeing grace at work when it invades our cozy arrangements. We're good at seeing the sinners out there; we're not so good at seeing the sinner in our heart. Perhaps like the Pharisee Simon, we've figured out how just to look at our good side. Perhaps like the Pharisee Simon, we've grown accustomed to seeing only the sin and the faults and the shortcomings in others, and we're good at categorizing people by their faults or by what they've done wrong. And perhaps like the blameless Pharisee Simon, we've become accustomed to only blaming others for what's wrong in our cozy little world.

And like Simon, we still have names. Good names. We have a good name among those around us. When people greet you in fellowship hall, the chances are pretty good no one will say, "Hello, sinner!" No, they're probably going to say, "Why, hello Simon! Good to see you, Simon. You look good today, Simon." And that, of course, is what we want in the church ... unless it keeps you from seeing the truth. That there's a Pharisee and a sinner in all of us. *None of us is too good to need saving, and none of us is too bad to be saved.* Jesus did not tell Simon that story about who was forgiven the most loving the most in order to say you have to become a really big sinner in order to be really thankful. That is a really twisted understanding of that story. No, Jesus told that story to say, "You, too, Simon, are a really big sinner." The significant difference between the Pharisee and this woman is not that she was a greater sinner; maybe she wasn't. The difference is that the woman knows it! And *that's* why she's at the feet of Jesus, treating Him with the love, respect, worship and courtesy He deserves.

My point today is not just to holler that you are all sinners. Simon might like me to do that, but there's no good news in that. You know what you have done or have left undone. You know the failures that you carry with you every day, the chances that you've squandered, the people you've hurt, the glaring inconsistencies in your own lives. Again, living in all of us there is a Pharisee who is trying so hard to be respectable and a sinner who keeps rebelling and/or failing. None of us are all bad and none of us are all good. But the message of the gospel is that God doesn't just love your good side; God loves *you*. All of you ... the sinner as well as the Pharisee within you. But you are never going to discover that love until you recognize your sin and receive His forgiveness.

I love the fact that this woman actually crashed the Pharisee's party. She just walked right in and boldly gave this exuberant expression of love and worship to Jesus! What would compel a woman to do something that audacious? According to Jesus, those who have been forgiven much, love much. People who genuinely discover forgiveness experience so much love from God that the love overflows from them, and they're capable of doing the most audacious things. They are just on fire with love, love borne out of gratitude. They are no longer wasting their heart's energy trying to categorize or blame or point out all the sinners out there, nor are they expending time and energy trying to deny the reality of the sinner inside. They've been freed from that, and now they just have enormous amounts of love placed in their hearts by God which energizes and enables them to do the most creative things. Like people in love want to do, they want to give ...extravagantly, freely, boldly.

These liberated women Luke mentions, these who followed and supported Jesus, they did so out of an enormous sense of gratitude. They were not groupies, crowding in to be near Jesus Christ Superstar. These women were in Christ's *debt*. They had suffered physically and emotionally before they met Jesus, and He had set them free. Now they wanted to help Him set others free. That is, of course, why we are in this sanctuary this morning. Christ has done something wonderful in our lives, as well. And tied together by the loving bonds of gratitude to Jesus Christ, we gather to give our love and support so that He can continue to set others free through us.