

Easy and Hard: Judgment and Forgiveness

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February 19, 2017

Luke 7:36-50 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

³⁶ One of the Pharisees asked Jesus^[a] to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and took his place at the table. ³⁷ And a woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. ³⁸ She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment. ³⁹ Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said 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." ⁴⁰ Jesus spoke up and said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." "Teacher," he replied, "speak." ⁴¹ "A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii (say \$80,000) and the other fifty (\$8000). ⁴² When they could not pay, he canceled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?" ⁴³ Simon answered, "I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt." And Jesus^[c] said to him, "You have judged rightly." ⁴⁴ 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 bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. ⁴⁵ You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. ⁴⁶ You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. ⁴⁷ ... 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." ⁴⁸ Then he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." ⁴⁹ But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?" ⁵⁰ And he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

Can you identify with either of these characters? We have Simon the self-righteous. Button-downed, straight-laced, *respectable*. Sort of ...uh, Presbyterian. At least that used to be our reputation. Anyone identify with Simon?

How about this nameless woman? Anybody identify with her? Judging by her actions and her tears, this woman is coming from, or at least recently has come from, a place of deep shame. I know that some of us in this room, many of us in this room, perhaps *most* of us can identify with her.

Let's walk our way through this passage.

A Pharisee, a Jewish religious leader, named Simon invites the young rabbi, Jesus, to come dine with him. Typical courtesy for a host to provide for a guest upon arrival would include

three things: water to wash the guests' feet, a kiss on the cheek, and oil to pour over the head. Water to wash feet. Commentators always remark that the roads people walked on were dusty. Well, friends, dust was not the only issue. These roads were also used by donkeys, camels, goats, dogs, horses. You get the picture. So for everyone's sake it was nice before eating to have water to wash one's feet. Also, the host would customarily give the guest a kiss on the cheek and finally, pour oil over the guest's head. There was not an abundance of water for bathing. So this would be a fragrant, pleasant-smelling oil to pour over the guest's head.

But Simon did none of these. A very deliberate and public snub.

A woman in the city learned that Jesus was at Simon's house and she came to the dinner, with an alabaster jar of oil. Now these dinners would perhaps be in an open courtyard where townspeople could come in to observe the wealthy folks at dinner and, in this case, to hear the famous rabbi preach.

Jesus, as was the custom, was reclining on a cushion at a low table, leaning on his left elbow so he could eat with his right hand. His feet would be extended out behind him.

We read: *She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment.*

A woman touching a man in public, even her husband, was simply not done. And why did she let down her hair to dry his feet, rather than using the long skirt flowing around her? No woman let down her hair in public. The shock level would have been palpable, equivalent to being fully naked in today's society.

Back to Luke: *Now when the Pharisee who had invited (Jesus) saw it, he said 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."*

The Reverend Lois Annich writes that "This Simon the Pharisee, is judging the woman as a sinner *and* he is judging Jesus for *not* judging the woman."

Simon is judging this woman and labeling her in his own mind as a "sinner." The presumption of most commentators is that she was a prostitute. Now, women today do not *choose* the sex trade today and they certainly did not in Jesus' day, either, *choose* to be a prostitute. In first-century Palestine if, for whatever reason, you did not have a man for economic support, you didn't have a lot of other options to feed yourself—and your children—if you had them, other than to sell your body. But we don't really know what "category" of "sinner" she was. The word Luke uses here is the same one that Simon Peter used to describe himself in our lesson a few weeks back when Jesus instructs the fishermen to cast their nets on the other side of the boat and they caught an incredible, *miraculous* number of fish. Peter throws himself at Jesus' feet and says, "Get away from me, Lord, for I am a

sinner...” Same word here: this woman is a “sinner,” Simon Peter is a “sinner.” And you and I are “sinners.”

But it’s so easy to judge others, isn’t it? Absolutely delicious sometimes. Henrietta, a widow, a church elder and self-appointed town busybody, just can’t help herself. In the coffee hour after worship, Henrietta goes over to Jake, a single young man who has recently joined the church and she sniffs, “Jake, I’m not one to judge, of course, but I did notice that your pickup was parked in front of the bar the other night when I drove by and was still there when I drove back three hours later.”

Jake didn’t say a word. But that evening he parked his pickup in front of Henrietta’s house and then walked home, leaving it there all night.

It’s so easy to judge and often so delicious. Pastor Lois Annich again: One of my girlfriends gave me a refrigerator magnet that reminds me of my inner Simon. It depicts a woman practicing yoga in the lotus position and saying, ‘Here I sit, totally evolved and at one with all life...compassionately not judging stupid people.’”

Jesus taught, “Judge not that you be not judged.” How many of you have heard that? That’s an entire sermon in itself for another day, but let me just say this about it. Jesus certainly is not saying that there should be no moral standards, that we simply look the other way in the midst of murder and mayhem, violence and abuse, under the injunction “Judge not, that you be not judged.” He’s of course not saying that.

That brief line, “Judge not, that you be not judged,” comes from Matthew 7, part of the Sermon on the Mount. When we read the entire paragraph we understand that Jesus wasn’t so much saying to be lax with others’ sin; he was saying we should be stricter about our own sin than that of others. “Before you try to take the speck out of someone else’s eye, take the log out of our own eyes so we can see the speck in others’ eyes better.”

I can identify with Simon...and Henrietta. Judging others comes easily to me. I’m certainly not proud of that. That is a confession of sin. I have shared before one example, that I used to be quite judgmental of divorced people. “Come on,” I thought. “If you’re really a Christian and you try hard there is no reason to divorce.” Well, in my late 20s I was a Christian and I tried really hard and spent thousands of dollars on marriage counseling and I ended up divorced. It was really horrible personally, but in the long run it was a good thing in several ways, including for my judgmentalism. Now I’m not the sharpest cheese in the bin, but it occurred to me maybe I should try to root out the rest of my prejudices before they all had to happen to me. Which I have tried to do, but I can still be judgmental. I’m working on it.

Let me give you a technique to stop judging that has helped me. When I catch myself judging people, or simply thinking ill of them because they are making my life miserable...(believe it or not, every once in a while there’s a church member like that...not at Oak Grove, of course), after a bit of fuming I usually remember to... pray for them, to ask God’s blessing upon them.

I try to replace my *judging* of them with *praying for* them. I don't know if it helps them, but I know it helps me.

Judge not. Take the log out of my own eye.

Now, what about the woman? Judging by her actions and her tears, this woman is coming, at least previously, from a place of deep shame.

In this passage Jesus tells a parable, the parable of two creditors, each forgiven, one a huge amount and one a smaller amount. Then Jesus explains to Simon how it relates to the scene before them. In some translations Jesus says, "Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven *because* she has shown great love." In other words, *because* she has shown great devotion to Jesus by bathing his feet with oil and drying them with her hair her sins have been forgiven. But the better translation is this, and it's such a vital difference. The better translation: "... I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; *hence* (or *therefore*) she has shown great love." Her sins had evidently been forgiven *before* this dinner. She had already encountered Jesus and had her sins forgiven, her life restored to wholeness. *Therefore* she had come prepared with the alabaster jar of oil to lavish upon him, in gratitude and adoration. She sought out Jesus to show him love and worship.

Lois Annich again: *I suspect there's ... a good bit of the harlot in all of us, that person who feels deep shame and distance from God and others because of a sense of brokenness or failure. (Friends, that's an awful lot of us in this room.) But let's not forget that this very plucky woman took the risk to open herself to God's forgiveness. Despite public condemnation she audaciously stepped out in faith to witness to Jesus' gift of new life. I often think about how our refusal to receive forgiveness dishonors God. In condemning ourselves, we are playing God, rather than trusting God. This woman, courageous and passionate as she is, reminds me to keep my focus on Jesus, and not on my failures or the failures of others.*

As we embrace that broken, raw part of us may we weep with joy that we are so loved, and in turn love with the wildness and abandon of a redeemed child of God.

As the author of I John phrases it, "We love because God first loved us."

Dear Ones, let me remind us:

God created us,
claimed us as Her children,
loves us beyond even a motherly love,
forgives us...restores us.

May we then respond with our own worship and service...
in the continuing story...
of grace...of forgiveness...of love.

Amen? Amen!

Pastoral Prayer from Sunday, February 19, 2017

God of all times and places, we humbly thank you for the gifts that your love has created in this world.

In love you set the planets in motion, carved the deep seas, flung the stars into the sky, built the tallest mountain and dug the deepest valley. You painted the wings of the butterfly, put stripes on the zebra, gave the cat her meow and created all people in your image. In the whisper of spring, you remind us that that life hums underground and the earth prepares to blossom again – born of your great love. How can we not wonder at the complexity and beauty of it all?

In the silence of our hearts we call to mind the blessings, the people, and places -- all those things we hold dear.

God of life, You promise to be with us in joy, in sorrow and in times of trial, and we pray for the ability to sense your nearness and to know that love. Make your healing and wholeness known in the lives of those in our congregation who are ill or facing trials of every kind. We pray for those in decline, whose memories are fading, and limbs are weakening. Bring comfort. We pray restoration for those who have given up on their dreams, those who live in fractured homes and relationships.

We pray healing, comfort and hope for those on our prayer list. (Names listed here, including those whose family members died this week.)

God of the world, create in us a willingness to listen deeply to those with a different view, to look carefully at situations we'd rather turn away from, to loosen our hold on the need to always be right. Help us to forgive. Light a fire in our souls for justice and holy anger when we witness oppression, prejudice and inequality. Give leaders of every nation the motivation to work for peace for all people, knowing that we are one.

Let our love be genuine, O God. Release us from shame. Grow us in quiet patience, let us persist in kindness, grace us with the ability to know that we are and we have enough. Keep our words and deeds humble. Give us the confidence to rest in the truth that nothing on heaven or earth, nothing past, present or future, can separate us from your love in Christ Jesus, in whose name we pray together...Lord's Prayer.