

**Luke 7:36-8:3**  
**St. Andrew's, Nogales**

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The story of the unnamed woman who washes Jesus feet with her tears, dries them with her hair and anoints them with a very costly perfume is well known. But it is curious to me that what most people remember about this woman is that she's a prostitute, although such a word is not used in the Greek text, even though there is more than one word in Greek for that particular sin.

The word the writer of the Gospel of Luke uses to describe the woman is the general Greek word for sinner, the same word that the writer uses in an earlier story about the amazing catch of fish, when Peter, you may remember, falls on his knees before Jesus and declares himself to be a sinner.

What we do need to remember about the unnamed woman, who shows up at the dinner uninvited, is that whatever sin she has committed, it is publicly known. People such as Simon, the Pharisee, consider the woman unworthy to be touching Jesus because in the Hebrew purity code a proper Hebrew man, especially a religiously important one such as Simon, a religious leader, would never have allowed any person known to be a sinner to touch him.

So why did Simon invite Jesus to dinner, and yet not treat him as well as an important guest should be treated? Well, the members of the Tubac Tuesday Bible study group felt that because Jesus was drawing great crowds wherever he went Simon was curious to get a close up look at him to learn more about Jesus, but that he was also being very cautious to keep his distance by not treating Jesus as an honored guest.

Jesus, of course, understands this dynamic, and knowing what Simon was thinking, asks to speak to him. And he tells him the story of two debtors, one who owed a great deal of money and the other a smaller sum, who are forgiven their debts. He asks Simon who would be the most grateful and of course Simon answers "the one for whom the greater debt was cancelled".

And Jesus reminds him of his lack of hospitality and points out that it is the woman who has treated him with respect. And he adds "Therefore I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love." And he turns to the woman and says out loud to her so that all present hear him, ""Your sins are forgiven. Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

Now this is where the conversation at the Tubac Tuesday Bible Study group this week got really interesting, because we read the story from more than one translation of the Bible. And we noticed what might seem at first to be a minor difference in translation between them. But that minor difference in translation brought up a major discussion about forgiveness.

Here are the two ways the sentence was translated:

NRSV *“Therefore I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; **hence** she has shown great love.”*

Another translation *“Therefore I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; **for** she has shown great love.”*

The first translation implies that the woman is already forgiven, that she knows it, and is acting in gratitude.

The second translation implies that she has acted with love and that she has been forgiven because of her act.

The questions that arose among the group included:

*Do we have to ask for God’s forgiveness in order to receive it?*

*Does God forgive us even if we don’t ask for it?*

How we see the answers to these questions in part depends on how we understand God.

*Do we see God as a being who rewards us for good behavior and punishes us for bad behavior?*

Think of today’s story about King David who arranged to have Uriah, the husband of Bathsheba, killed in battle so that he might take Bathsheba for his wife. The Prophet Nathan was sent by God to call David to repentance and he does so by telling the story of the rich man who stole the poor man’s lamb to prepare for a feast for a visitor rather than kill one from his own plentiful flock.

David is forced to recognize his own behavior and repents, saying, "I have sinned against the Lord." And Nathan says the Lord has put away David's sin, that he will not die, but adds that his and Bathsheba’s child will die. What a dreadful punishment David receives for having sinned! This is an understanding of God as one who rewards and punishes us, a common view in the Old Testament (although not the only one).

*Or do we see God as a being who loves us even when we sin?*

The Episcopal Church comes out of a tradition that believes God loves us no matter what. We believe that God’s love is unconditional. The God that we know through Jesus doesn’t say, “I will love you, if.....” “I will punish you, if....” Does that mean that God doesn’t care what we say or do? Of course God cares. As Henry Nouwen has said, “God’s love wouldn’t be real if God didn’t care. To love without condition doesn’t mean to love without concern.”

Unconditional love doesn’t mean unconditional approval. God loves us even when we fall into sin, and waits for us to return. We believe God calls us to recognize that we are loved and to live into being the persons God calls us to be. God forgives us even if we don’t ask for that forgiveness, but often our asking for it means that we have opened ourselves up to accept God’s forgiveness.

Another important question that arose in our discussion was

*How do we deal with forgiving someone when they have hurt us if they don't even understand that they have hurt us?*

This is something we humans often face. I think it helps if we remember there are two sides to forgiveness: giving and receiving. It would be wonderful if the two sides of forgiveness always came together at the same time, but we all know that doesn't always happen. Sometimes we want to forgive someone, but they are not ready to receive that forgiveness.

Giving and receiving forgiveness is an interaction and we human beings are often unable to receive forgiveness until we are able to give it to others, and we can't always offer forgiveness to others until we are ready to receive forgiveness ourselves.

But let us remember that to forgive someone is also our own letting go of the thing that binds us, whether or not the one who hurt us responds.

God forgives us. Can we forgive others?

God forgives us. Can we receive forgiveness from others?

That is always our challenge as Christians.

May God help us grow into the fullness of God's love.

Amen.