

Sermon notes/follow-up
Luke 7:36-50
Jan. 16, 2011
Rich Lusk

Several commentaries have been very helpful in my studies of Luke's gospel. On this passage, I found Art Just's Concordia commentary to be especially helpful. See also Tom Wright in the For Everyone series; Joel Green; Ken Bailey's *Through Peasant Eyes*, ch. 1 is a helpful study of this text in its cultural setting; Peter Leithart's *The Four*, 188f, is a good overview.

We're good at sinning, God is good at forgiving. What a match!

Jesus still eats and drinks with sinners. That's what the Eucharist is all about.

Art Just includes the best discussion of the causal relationship of the woman being forgiven and loving Jesus (p. 324f, 328f). 7:47 makes it sound as if the woman is forgiven because she loved much. But 7:50 attributes her salvation to faith. Of course, there is something a circular relationship here since God's grace both enables repentance and is given in response to repentance. But the bottom line is that the woman's love is given as her returning answer to the *prior* welcome of Jesus. In fact, most commentators assume this woman had already encountered Jesus previous to entering Simon's house so she had already heard his divine declaration of pardon (see Just, p. 325, 329f). Her great love is the result of being forgiven; because she has been forgiven much she loves much. In terms of what we observe, we reason theologically backwards from her love to the fact that she has already been forgiven. 7:47 is like the saying, "Where there's smoke, there's fire." That does not mean smoke causes fire; in fact the reverse is the case. But just as we can reason backwards from smoke to the presence of fire, so we can reason backwards from the woman's love to her having been greatly forgiven.

The truth is that it is virtually impossible to confess sins against someone who we believe will have no mercy towards us. Trusting in mercy is what enables real, honest confession to take place. She could confess her sins because she knew she had found a loving Savior in Jesus; she knew she could expose her sins to him without being condemned for them. Love flows from forgiveness; the disposition to seek forgiveness flows from an assurance of mercy. This is exactly how it works in our liturgy each week: "The Lord calls upon us to make confession of our sin in the sure confidence that he is faithful and just to forgive us and restore us to the joy of our salvation. Let us humbly kneel and confess our sins together . . ."

This passage is another crucial meal scene in Luke's gospel. Teaching and table fellowship always go together. Simon's self-righteousness is not a private spiritual problem; it manifests itself in a broken relationship not only between himself and Jesus, but also between himself and the woman. This is a constant theme in Luke's gospel: grace creates community, while pride destroys it. Forgiveness and fellowship always go together.

Simon should have not only showed more hospitality to Jesus, he should have also showed hospitality to this sinful woman who was clearly evidencing repentance. His refusal to do so showed he had no room for "the other" in his heart. He was way too full of himself and his own supposed righteousness to make room for a Savior *or* a nameless sinner. Simon turns out to be a host who is anything but a true host. Meanwhile, Jesus fully restores the woman not only by forgiving her but by offering her fellowship and friendship.

On community and forgiveness in this story, see Green, p. 314f. Green points out that Jesus sending her away in "peace" must include restoration to wholeness, including her reception into the covenant community. The question, of course, is whether or not the community will accept Jesus' pronouncement that she is clean. For that to happen, the covenant community must learn to view God as the one who freely cancels debts and befriends sinners.

The Lutheran Apology of the Augsburg Confession speaks of this passage thusly:

"Faith is that which grasps the free mercy of God...The woman came believing that she should seek the forgiveness of sins from Christ. This is the highest way of worshipping Christ..."

The very act of Jesus that proves to the woman that Jesus is indeed a prophet of God is the very thing Simon takes as proof that Jesus cannot be a prophet. Simon thought Jesus *might* be the promised prophet until he accepted the woman. Meanwhile, the woman comes to Jesus because she believes his presence signals the presence of God's grace and mercy. Simon, like the other Pharisees, rejects God's plan because that plan includes salvation for scandalous sinners (cf. Lk. 7:30).

Simon wrongly concluded that Jesus must not know what kind of woman this was. In truth, Jesus not only knew her deeds, he forgave them. And on top of that Jesus, also knows and exposes what kind of man Simon is, revealing to Simon things about himself he did not know or would not admit.

The line in this passage is not between “sinners” and “the righteous” (as Simon would have it). Rather, the line is between sinners who know and admit they are sinners (like the woman) and sinners who continue on in arrogant and willful blindness to their sinfulness (like Simon). Jesus is putting new labels and new categories into play, challenging Simon’s preconceived, preconstructed notions of the way the world works.

Another irony: Simon is disgusted that this sinful woman breaks all social conventions and proprieties. But in reality, it is Simon’s lack of hospitality towards Jesus that becomes the real social blunder.

Jesus’ closing words in this passage contain Luke’s whole vocabulary for salvation – faith, salvation, peace. Once again, salvation has come to the most unlikely candidate, and the Great Reversal of the Lukan narrative continues apace.

This story is a story of the woman’s faith. So what do we learn about faith from this narrative? Two primary lessons: [1] Faith seeks and finds forgiveness in Jesus. Faith sees Jesus as the embodiment of God’s love and grace. Faith receives and rests in him as the Savior, the Friend of Sinners. [2] Faith overflows with works of love and gratitude towards the Savior. Faith is not just intellectual assent; it involves the emotions. Faith is not a static, one time act; it reveals itself in ongoing actions of beautiful worship and costly devotion. Just as the woman took her place at the feet of Jesus, so all believers are disciples, sitting and serving at the feet of the Master.

Simon stands as a warning in a number of different ways. For example, just because Simon invites Jesus to his home and even shares a meal with him does not guarantee his salvation (cf. Lk. 13:26-27). Nearness to Jesus, even eating with Jesus at his table, cannot guarantee salvation apart from a response of contrite faith like the woman. That’s the irony of this story: The one who initially shows an interest in Jesus misses out on forgiveness, while an uninvited guest finds forgiveness.

Simone was sitting at his own dinner table with the Love of God Incarnate...and yet missed it! Consider that a warning!

Why is Simon named while the woman is not? In part, this may be a sign of social status. Simon is a wealthy and important person, a would-be benefactor and

religious leader of the community. The woman is only known by her sordid background and profession; she is a nameless “sinner.” But there’s probably more going on. Quite often in the Bible generic references to a “woman” are used to point to a larger biblical-theological theme. The woman represents Eve; she is the unfaithful bride/mother who must be purified and redeemed so she can be united to her true husband, Christ (cf., e.g., Judges 9:53-54; Jn. 2:4; Rev. 12). As such, she represents all of us; she is a true church-figure.

Some commentators point out that the woman’s tears are probably not just tears of repentance over her own sin, but tears of indignation at how Jesus is being snubbed and insulted by Simon.

7:48-50 can be used to point us to Jesus’ divinity. The parable Jesus tells portrays sin as a debt humans owe to the lender, who is obviously God. But in the narrative, Jesus is the one who forgives the woman’s debt; thus, he is claiming to be lender to whom debts (sins) are owed. Rightly understood, his proclamation of forgiveness is also a claim to be God the flesh. The same is true of verse 50: Faith directed towards him results in salvation, which can only be true if he is some way the embodiment of YHWH. The people cannot fathom this, which is why they wonder, “Who is this who even forgives sins?!”

On the chiasmic literary structure of this passage as well as thematic connections with the preceding pericope of 7:18-35, see Just, p. 326.

In Tony Campolo’s book *The Kingdom of God Is a Party*, he tells a great story that fits with this passage. (Instead of typing it myself, I am copying and pasting from Tim Chester’s blog).

Tony Campolo tells of a time when he was speaking in Honolulu in Hawaii. Campolo lives on the east coast of the United States so his body was six hours ahead of Hawaiian time. At three o’clock in the morning it felt like nine o’clock to him. Awake and hungry for breakfast, he found himself in a ‘greasy spoon’ café in the small hours of the morning. As he bit into his doughnut, eight or nine prostitutes walked in. They had just finished for the night. Their talk was loud and crude, and it was difficult to avoid listening in. He heard one tell the others it was her birthday the following day. ‘What do you want from me? A birthday cake?’ was the sarcastic reply. ‘Why be so mean?’ she replied. ‘I was just telling you. I don’t expect anything. I’ve never had a birthday party.’

I'm not expecting to have one now.' When Campolo heard this he made a decision.

When the women left, he went over to the café owner, a guy called Harry. 'Do they always come in here?' 'Yes,' said Harry. 'Including the one who sat next to me?' 'Yes, that's Agnes. Why do you want to know?' 'Because I heard her say it's her birthday tomorrow and I thought we might throw her a party.' Pause. Then a smile grew across Harry's lips. 'That'd be a great idea.' A moment later his wife was in on the plot.

Half past two the next morning. Campolo had brought decorations and Harry had baked a cake. Word had got out and it seemed as if every prostitute in Honolulu was in the café – plus Campolo, a preacher. When Agnes entered with her friends, she was flabbergasted. Her mouth fell open and her knees wobbled. As she sat on a stool, everyone sang happy birthday. 'Blow out the candles,' people shouted, but in the end Harry had to do it for her. Then he handed her a knife. 'Cut the cake, Agnes, so we can all have some.' She looked at the cake. Then slowly said, 'Is it alright ... would you mind ... if I wait a little longer ... if we didn't eat it straight away?' 'Sure. It's okay,' said Harry. 'Take it home if you want.' 'Can I?' she said. 'Can I take it home now? I'll be back in a few minutes.' And with that she left, carrying her precious cake out the café. There was a stunned silence. So Campolo said: 'What do you say we pray?' And they did. Campolo lead a group of prostitutes in prayer at 3.30 in the morning. When they were done, Harry said: 'Hey! You never told me you were some kind of preacher. What kind of church do you belong to?' Campolo answered: 'I belong to a church that throws birthday parties for whores at 3.30 in the morning.' Harry waited for a moment. Then he kind of sneered. 'No you don't. There's no church like that. If there was, I'd join it. I'd join a church like that.' Campolo comments:

Wouldn't we all? Wouldn't we all love to join a church that throws birthday parties for whores at 3.30 in the morning? Well, that's the kind of church that Jesus came to create! I don't know where we got the other one that's so prim and proper. But anybody who reads the New Testament will discover a Jesus who loved to party with whores and with all kinds of left-out people. The publicans and 'sinners' loved him because he partied with them. The lepers of society found in him someone who would eat and drink with them. And while the solemnly pious people could not relate to what he was about, those lonely people who usually didn't get invited to parties took to him with excitement.

Here is the scene from The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe that I used in the sermon:

"Here is your brother," he said, "and – there is no need to talk to him about what is past."

Edmund shook hands with each of the others and said to each of them in turn, "I'm sorry," and everyone said "That's all right." And then everyone wanted very hard to say something which would make it quite clear that they were all friends with him again – something ordinary and natural – and of course no one could think of anything in the world to say.

Here it is in the movie:

The scene begins immediately after Edmund is rescued from the witch. We see Aslan talking with Edmund on the hill just before they return to the group. As their private conversation ends, Aslan and Edmund walk back down to camp.

Lucy: Edmund! (Peter quiets her. We see Aslan nod to Edmund to rejoin the group. Edmund begins walking into the camp towards his siblings. He looks sorrowful and ashamed.)

Aslan: What's done is done. There is no need to speak with Edmond about his past. (Everyone seems a little surprised by this at first. But they trust Aslan, so they welcome Edmond back gladly.)

Edmund: Hello. (He says this with his head down. Lucy steps towards him and hugs him, grateful he is alive.)

Susan: (Steps forward to also hug Edmund.) Are you alright?

Edmund: I'm a little tired.

Peter: Get some sleep. And Edmond... (smiling) try not to wander off!

From Peter Leithart

[T]here is a liturgical structure to this episode in Luke 7. Jesus is in a house at a table. The woman comes in and offers her oil to Jesus and mourns her sins. Jesus teaches Simon about his duties as host, pronounces the woman forgiven, and then sends her away in peace. It's all there: Gathering at a table, offering and mourning, teaching, absolution, benediction. The woman is renewed by her contact with Jesus.

One of the focal points of the story is hospitality. Simon the Pharisee has Jesus to his home, but doesn't offer him welcome in the traditional way. He doesn't give him water to wash his feet; he doesn't kiss him in greeting; he

doesn't anoint Jesus. The woman does; she is the better hostess, even though it is not her house.

We can put these two dimensions of the passage together. The story is ordered liturgically; it is about hospitality. That means our worship is hospitality. It is true that God is welcoming us into His home. But it is equally true that in worship we, the palace servants of the Lord, prepare a suitable place for Him and welcome Him into our presence.

In this way too, our liturgy sets the pattern for our homes. Our calling is to make our homes places where God is comfortable. We are to make our homes a hospitable environment for the Spirit. Our lives together should be such that Jesus would be happy to be among us. Because He is.

The incident in Luke 7 takes place at a table. Here especially we are to welcome Jesus our Lord, Jesus our Host, even as He welcomes us. And having welcomed Jesus here, we are sent out to our homes, so we can welcome Him there. Make your home a place where you can sing, as you do here each week, "Blessed is He who comes in the Name of the Lord."

I listened to a lot of great sermons on this passage, which helped me preach it better, including multiple sermons by Tim Keller; Craig Higgins; David Turner; and Mark Meynell.