

Fourth Sunday After Pentecost – Eric Nord

2 Samuel 11:26-12:10, 13-15; Psalm 32; Galatians 2:15-21; Luke 7:36-8:3

Consider this brief drama that Luke presents. Why is this woman weeping, and washing Jesus' feet with her tears?

In his book Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes, Kenneth Bailey interprets this (and other) gospel stories through the lens of Middle Eastern culture, history, and religious traditions. Here is a somewhat condensed version of Bailey's telling of this drama: Jesus had been preaching his message that God loves sinners and extends forgiveness to them. This woman, who the story tells us had been living a sinful life, had heard Jesus' message, and believed. **Having already received (experienced?) forgiveness**, she is searching for Jesus to offer thanks, and perhaps to join his followers.

Meanwhile, Jesus' message was causing a stir among the religious authorities. His message of forgiveness, and his willingness to interact with people whose conduct was questionable, put him at odds with the Pharisees, who strongly believed in ritual purity, and scrupulous adherence to the law.

This all comes to a head at this dinner. Simon and other Pharisees invite Jesus to a dinner at Simon's home—perhaps they want to grill him about his obviously flawed theology, or try to straighten him out, since his behavior is (at least to them) rather scandalous. The woman, having learned that Jesus will be dining at Simon's house, goes there to see him. Her silent presence on the fringes of the event would not cause a stir—at that time outcasts such as her were not shut out of social events, rather they sat quietly on the margins, and were fed at the end of the meal; feeding them increased the social standing of the host. (Some rabbis advised against closing the door during a meal lest the blessing of God be shut out). So she is there when Jesus arrives.

There is a proper etiquette of hospitality in Middle Eastern culture, and hospitality is taken very seriously in Middle Eastern culture. Here is how it should unfold: 1) guest is greeted by host with a kiss, 2) water is brought for washing feet and hands, and olive oil for anointing the face, 3) only after washing a grace is offered, 4) guests then recline on dining couches **with the eldest/highest status guest reclining first**. 5) Only after this has all transpired could the meal begin. But look at what happens—verses 44-46 tell us that no kiss was offered, no water for washing, and no oil for anointing.

Simon is a keeper of traditions, he **knows the "right" way to do this**. What is happening here, Bailey tells us, is an insult, a "putting in his place" of this upstart Rabbi. How does Jesus respond? He could call Simon out, or he could leave. Instead, verse 36 says *he went to the Pharisee's house and took his place at the table*. When not offered the required courtesies, **he goes straight to the table and takes his place**. Have the others already reclined? Bailey suggests not, but that Jesus takes the place of the honored guest by reclining first. He takes the initiative away from Simon here.

It seems Jesus is practicing what he preaches, elsewhere, about non-violent resistance—not passively accepting belittling treatment, nor retaliation, but resistance without violence. Walter Wink asserts that in Matthew 5:38-42 Jesus shows us a third way, which neither accepts evil nor violently opposes it. *If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also ... if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile*. In a culture where the left hand is unclean, the only way to strike the right cheek

is a backhand blow—an insult, a “putting in their place” of an inferior. Turning the other cheek is not then meekly accepting the insult, but demanding to be struck as an equal. Roman soldiers were allowed to press civilians to carry their pack **no more than one mile**. Voluntarily carrying the pack an extra mile puts the soldier in a bad place; will he be disciplined for breaking this rule? In both these examples, as in the Luke story, the aggrieved party takes the initiative and reasserts their humanity.

The woman has been there the whole time, and observes the insulting way Jesus has been treated. Her response to the pointed lack of courtesies offered by Simon is to wash his feet herself. Since Jesus is reclining at the table already, his hands and head are not accessible, and in any case, touching them would be seen as highly inappropriate. So she washes his feet with her tears.

Why is she weeping? Perhaps her tears are simply of joy and thankfulness for the forgiveness she has received. Perhaps they are tears of remorse for her sins. Bailey suggests that she is wounded or angered by the mistreatment Jesus has received, and participates in his pain and rejection.

This is rather surprising to Simon et al., but when she lets down her hair and begins to dry his feet with her hair, they are really shocked. At that time, a woman’s hair was **always** covered (as in Iran or Saudi Arabia). Uncovering her hair in public was an act of shameful revelation (some rabbinic traditions include uncovering of the hair in public as grounds for divorce); **only her husband** should see her hair uncovered. She could have used her skirt to dry his feet—why use her hair? Bailey sees her drying of his feet with her hair as an ultimate pledge of loyalty to Jesus.

What is expected of Jesus here? The “socially proper” response to this awkward and tense situation is to send her away. But she has just stuck up for him by washing his feet when the host would not, and shown great devotion to him. To send her away would be to reject her, and he does not do so. Since he does not do this, the Pharisees are thinking, “He has no shame!”

If this man were a prophet... (verse 39—Simon & Co. clearly doubt Jesus’ role as a prophet, else they would not have snubbed him) *he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him—that she is a sinner*. Simon’s worldview includes two kinds of people: good upright folks and sinners (law-keepers and law-breakers).

Jesus responds to Simon’s thought and the obvious tension in the room with a short parable about two debtors who are unable to repay their debts, and who are both forgiven. Bailey notes that the terms for forgiving a sin and forgiving a debt overlap; so Jesus’ parable about forgiveness of debts easily extends to forgiveness of sins.

Jesus tells and interprets the parable in defense of the woman’s actions, which violates all sense of propriety; he does not apologize for her actions or try to distance himself from her. She has gone out on a limb for him, and he does not let her down.

Jesus’ interpretation of the parable is a clear and public attack on Simon’s hospitality; this is probably a grave insult. (But then so was the lack of hospitality!) At the same time, the parable and interpretation imply forgiveness for Simon also. Is Simon one of those who later conspires to have Jesus crucified? We don’t know.

Bailey notes that in this parable, Jesus affirms his own deity. The creditor is obviously God, and the two debtors can easily be seen to be the woman (500 denarii) and Simon (50 denarii). At the end of the parable, Jesus tells the woman, *Your sins are forgiven*, putting himself in the place of the creditor, the forgiver, who is obviously God. (This is said for **Simon's** benefit—she has already experienced forgiveness, which is why she has come to offer thanks). Since Jesus has just pointed out Simon's appalling lack of hospitality, and Simon is obviously represented by the 50-denarii debtor in the parable, is Jesus telling Simon that he has been forgiven?

Simon & Co. are focused on the woman's sin. At the end of the account, they ask, *Who is this who even forgives sins?* Is this an honest question of amazement, or is it a belittling question, as in "Who does he think he is, forgiving sins?" As the larger story of Jesus' confrontation with the religious authorities plays out, we suspect the latter.

Simon wanted to know if Jesus was a prophet, but Simon and Jesus have very different ideas about what a prophet is! Simon sees a prophet as an upright person who avoids the taint of sin, while Jesus sees a prophet as someone who risks getting hurt, even for sinners, by confronting/opposing their attackers.

Simon asks, "Doesn't he know **what kind** of woman this is?" In Simon's view there are two kinds of people, law-breakers and law-keepers, bad and good. He is clearly the latter, and the woman is obviously the former. Jesus redirects his question, because in Jesus' view the two kinds of people are those who understand their sin and the forgiveness that God extends, and those who do not understand their sin and the forgiveness extended to them—the very grateful and the less grateful, or those who love much and those who love little.

Simon's system of categorizing people doesn't work because his categories are the wrong categories. Jesus is saying in this parable, "Everyone is in the sinners' category, but some know it and some do not."

Just as Jesus here points out to Simon his failing, in our Old Testament passage Nathan points out to David **his** failing, in his adultery with Bathsheba and his killing of Uriah. Nathan uses a parable to engage David's heart before confronting him directly, and David accepts God's judgment against him, demonstrating a contrite spirit.

David's declaration in Psalm 32 may refer to this incident. *Happy are those whose sin is forgiven.* Later the psalm speaks of the cost of silence about our sin: *while I kept silence my body wasted away.* Lack of recognition of our sin, and of repentance, damages us.

In the drama at Simon's house the woman shows this kind of happiness; it compelled her to seek out Jesus and offer him her loyalty. Simon's question, "What kind of woman is this?" shows that he does not understand Psalm 32, and that he does not understand his own need for repentance.

I confess that in my life I am often more like Simon and less like this remarkable woman. "What kind of woman is this?" She is a Psalm 32 kind of person.
