

Sermon (6/12/16, Luke 7: 36-8:3):

As you know, after worship I usually stand in the back to greet all of you. I enjoy that time. Sometimes I tease you. Sometimes you tease me. Sometimes you share with me something heavy you are dealing with. Sometimes there are tears and hugs.

What if, after today's worship, I stood back there and greeted each of you by saying, 'I forgive you.' What would run through your mind? How would you react? What would you do? What would you talk about in the car on the way home? I'm thinking it would depend.

If you had done something to hurt me recently and you were feeling really bad about it, you would probably be relieved. You would probably know exactly why I was saying those words. We would hug and off we would both go feeling good.

If you're like me...your face would probably turn red and your heart would start pounding because it doesn't take much for me to feel guilty. I might not have a clue as to why you're forgiving me but I would give you the benefit of the doubt, figuring I must have done something wrong.

Or perhaps you would be surprised. Such words might even sound a bit snarky and presumptuous. 'Why? What did I do?' You might ask. You might even become angry and put off by my 'high and almighty' attitude.

We talk a lot about forgiveness in this place. It's the kind of language Jesus used often and it's the kind of language that tended to get him into a lot of trouble. Such was the case with the paralyzed man who was lowered through a roof to Jesus' feet. Before Jesus healed him, he told the man his sins were forgiven.

'Who does this guy think he is?' Said the church officials. 'Willy-nilly forgiving people!'

Jesus also hung out with a lot of despised sinners which made those who presumed they were on God's 'good' list really ticked off.

Forgiveness – it's a great word but it can also be quite a scandalous word. It has the power to heal, to mend, to reshape relationships, and to provide a new beginning. It also has the power to offend, disturb, rile, and even bring out the worst in us.

Sometimes it feels more insulting than life giving. Sometimes it goes against the grain of our impulses to condemn and be vengeful. Sometimes it feels naïve, foolish, maybe even dangerous.

If it's any comfort, the Apostles struggled with it too.

'Lord, how often should I forgive-seven times?' Peter once asked Jesus. 'Not seven but seventy seven times!' Jesus demanded. Peter was not happy.

Today's story is again about forgiveness. For some reason Simon, a Pharisee, a church official, invited Jesus to dinner. While sitting at the table, a nameless woman enters and quietly sneaks up on Jesus.

From all indications, it appears she had interacted with Jesus before this and in and through that encounter, she had found the hope of divine mercy.

It took a great deal of courage for this poor woman to do what she did. The text doesn't tell us what sin she had committed but clearly it was something the whole community knew about and wasn't about to let her off the hook for.

She was probably aware that the people at this dinner party would recognize her and she would be forced to again bear the brunt of their ridicule and scorn. Yet, it did not deter her.

Almost as soon as she saw Jesus, she began to weep. Clearly, just the sight of him moved her deeply. Raw and honest tears couldn't help but to rise to the surface as it does for us all when love hits us in deep places. There is no way to hold them back. They just pour out.

It's the kind of thing we witness at airports and in children's classrooms when families are reunited with a father or mother who has been gone for months serving in the military. No matter how many times I see scenes like that, they choke me up every time.

We are told that she moved in on Jesus from behind, which makes sense because when people sat for dinner back then they did so by reclining on the floor with their feet usually tucked behind them in some fashion. As her tears fell, she used them to wash off the mud and dirt that was on his feet. She then proceeded to anoint them with the perfumed ointment she had brought and, finally, she dried them with her hair and

kissed them.

It would take a hard heart not to be moved by such a scene. I know I would have been a mess but, then again, I'm always good for a cry.

We aren't told how the other dinner guests reacted with the exception of the host, Simon, the Pharisee who had invited Jesus. His response was anything but sympathetic. Quickly, he pointed his ridicule at Jesus wondering why he would let such a sinful, dirty, disdained woman like this touch him.

Now, of course, what is implied by Simon's scorn is that he was significantly better than she was and he had church credentials to prove it!

Once again, we see the differing reactions forgiveness tends to evoke. For this woman, it was gift – pure, life changing, unexpected, knowingly undeserved gift.

For Simon, it was scandal. It was offensive and insulting, clearly provoking his scorn and hostility.

The little parable Jesus tells to Simon is meant to kind of sneak up on Simon, a little like this woman had done to show Jesus her gratitude. What's interesting is that forgiveness, in this parable, is equated with financial debt. Quite suddenly, mercy takes on a whole new dimension as Jesus implies that it should include one's balance sheets. We again sense just how scandalous forgiveness can feel and, if we're honest, it doesn't exactly sit well. Suddenly, we find ourselves on the defensive like Simon. It's one thing to say 'I'm sorry' or 'All is forgiven'. It's quite another to stamp 'paid in full' on a loan statement where the balance due is far from zero.

In Jesus' parable he proposes that two people are forgiven their debt. One owes quite a bit more than the other. Who do you think will be more grateful? Simon figures it's the guy who owes more but I'm thinking that both of these debts were on the significant side and, therefore, even though one was forgiven more, both of them would have been shocked and jumping with joy. Just imagine a note like that coming from your credit card company! What feelings would surface in you! I know I'd be dancing like Snoopy in a Peanut's cartoon!

When forgiveness is described in these terms we are reminded again

just how rare it is. In fact, sometimes we are the Simons who pray thank goodness I'm better than that woman. The Simons who think that the gears which keep the world going will somehow grind to a halt if mercy is not carefully dispensed in balanced, miserly doses. Surely we can name plenty of incidences and people to prove our point.

Sometimes, many times, we are the woman who hears so often that dirt has more value than she does that she begins to believe it. Our children hear it on the playground, from adults, and, in some cases, even within their own families. We hear it in the places we work, in the success that always seems just beyond our reach, even in the Simon voices within our own heads constantly reminding us that we don't measure up. We hear it again and again – we're not good enough, pretty enough, smart enough, talented enough, successful enough, liked enough, face booked enough, texted enough, noticed enough.

As soon as this woman saw Jesus she began to weep. She had never known anyone, let alone a Rabbi and a male, who had made her feel valued. She had never known anyone who was able to convince her she was something more than her sins. She had never known anyone whose love poured out so freely that it was able to fill even her empty cup. At the sight of Jesus she wept because, as we say during a baptism, she loved because God had first loved her.

Her tears of grateful love and devotion fell uncontrollably, melting the mess that soiled Jesus' well-traveled feet.

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In the church I served previous to this one, we had a baptismal font which was hand made by an artist in Michigan. One of the wooden panels that cradled the bowl on top had a large teardrop carved into it. I loved that font and its carving. That carved tear was significant for me because I believe that's what fills every baptismal font - God's tears. Not necessarily tears that come from a skinned knee but, instead, tears that come from a mended, renewed heart. Not necessarily tears that come from a place of loss but, instead, a place of joy where the heart of the divine is reunited with the heart of the Beloved. Holy tears used to melt away the mud and mess from our well-traveled bodies. Holy tears reminding us of

what forgiveness can do when it is unleashed, no holds bar. Holy tears declaring to Claire, her family, and to us that no matter what the Simons of this world might say, we matter; we are and always will be God's precious ones.

To God alone be all the glory.