

Galatians 2:15-21

We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; yet we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ. And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by faith in Christ, and not by doing the works of the law, because no one will be justified by the works of the law. But if, in our effort to be justified in Christ, we ourselves have been found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin? Certainly not! But if I build up again the very things that I once tore down, then I demonstrate that I am a transgressor. For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not nullify the grace of God; for if justification comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing.

Let us continue our worship together in prayer: Nurturing Lord, open our ears to what you would have us hear and our eyes to the new things you are doing in our midst, so that we might see you at work in and through us. If these words are not your Word, may they be forgotten and come to naught, but if they be Thy Word, may they adhere to our hearts, forever transforming us from glory into glory, into the creatures you would have us be, though who art our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Luke 7:36-8:3 (NRSV)

One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and took his place at the table. 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. 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.

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.' Jesus spoke up and said to him, 'Simon, I have something to say to you.' 'Teacher,' he replied, 'speak.'

'A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he cancelled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?' Simon answered, 'I suppose the one for whom he cancelled the greater debt.' And Jesus said to him, 'You have judged rightly.' Then turning towards 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. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore, 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.' Then he said to her, 'Your sins are forgiven.'

But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, 'Who is this who even forgives sins?' And he said to the woman, 'Your faith has saved you; go in peace.'

Soon afterwards he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their resources.

The Word of the Lord...

¹From all we can tell, Simon the Pharisee – the Religious Leader - invites Jesus to his house with honorable intentions. We're fairly used to seeing the Pharisees and Sadducees, the religious leaders of Jesus' day, as those who are out to get Jesus, and so we sometimes walk into these texts with that assumption. That Simon is out to trick or trap Jesus.

From all we can tell, that is not the case here.²

And things seem to be going well, until that woman arrives. *That* woman. It's not that she is uninvited. There were, in all likelihood, many uninvited guests wandering around this semi-public dinner party. It's not a breach of etiquette that is her problem.

It's her.

She is the problem. She is a sinner.

When he sees that Jesus does not demand that she leave, Simon the Religious Leader begins to wonder if he has been wrong about Jesus. Because, after all, wouldn't a true prophet have been able to tell that this woman is not clean? Not proper company? Not respectable?

Of course, Jesus beats him at this game, because not only does Jesus know *about* this woman, Jesus knows what Simon *thinks* of this woman. Jesus is a prophet, and more. Jesus tells Simon the Pharisee a parable about forgiveness. And Jesus shows what forgiveness can do³.

Then Jesus says something that is quite significant: "*Your faith has saved you.*"

She has been saved by faith.

Her sins have been forgiven.

Though broken and flawed she becomes a means of grace for the glory of God. More than having her sentence reduced, more than being acquitted, the slate has been wiped clean. In forgiveness, her old life is gone. The record is cleared. A new life is begun.⁴

Alleluia! Amen!

The sinning woman wins – Yay! Not the religious leader....

But why? I mean really(asks she in the religious leader robe), how is this fair?

Enter Galatians:

...we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ. And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by faith in Christ, and not by doing the works of the law, because no one will be justified by the works of the law.

A few months ago, I read a sermon by Bob Dunham, Senior Pastor at University Presbyterian Church in Chapel Hill, entitled "Which comes first: Grace or Repentance?" In it, he said that he could not find a single instance in the Gospels "when Jesus requires repentance before he extends grace or healing or hospitality.... Repentance is a *response* to God's grace, not a prerequisite for it. Grace always comes first⁵."

Grace comes first. Because we are not justified by the law. We are not justified by works. We are justified by faith.
Your faith has saved you.

Being reconciled to God is not something that happens because we earn or deserve it, it is a result of faith. Of accepting God's love. It is a hallmark of the reformed tradition, an aspiration and inspiration. We are justified by grace through faith, placed in right relationship with God.

Faith. Trust. Not a possession. Not something we can master, control, or manipulate. Not something we do. Not something we perform. Charles Cousar (Cowzer) in a commentary on Galatians writes, "Faith is not a reliance on one's accomplishments or *one's lack of accomplishments*, but a trust in the accomplishments of God."⁶

"Jesus contrasts the righteousness of God with the unrighteousness of human beings. Rooted in the sinful interior of the human heart unrighteousness is contempt for self, others or God and the resulting lack of graciousness and gratitude in relationships – traits exhibited by Simon, who is unaware of his own need for divine mercy."⁷

And so in our passage today, which one of these characters do we really relate to?

I, for one, fall into the category of 'sinning woman' – although not to the extent of this woman. I'm not 'that' kind of sinner. I go to church, I make a significant contribution to said church, you can even find me at church even when it's not Sunday morning, I always try to do what is right and if you really want to know – I probably succeed a good 90-95% of the time... okay 80, give or take 20 percentage points.

But that's still better than someone like the woman from this story.

She is clearly on the outside looking in. She doesn't even know how to handle herself in public, the right rituals to follow! I mean, I love Jesus too but I'm not going to run after him, fall to the ground at his feet and rub lotion all over him and then... dry it with my hair. First of all, how would I ever get the oil out and secondly.... well, that is just now how we do things here.

This woman clearly does not belong anywhere near God's house, let alone Jesus. And yet Jesus changes everything. The last verses in the passage we read are proof of just what kind of rule breaker he was, advocating radical inclusivity with woman named as his followers, too important for the writer of Luke or the process of canonization through the early centuries dominated by men to ignore.

Jesus changes all the rules... and that can be hard for a group of his followers who really, really like rules and boundaries and decorum and tradition and quite frankly, for things to be clear. We want to know the rules so that we can get it right and know for a fact when others are getting it wrong. And even if this woman is 'ok' in his eyes... I'm not sure she is ok in ours.

Is it possible that in our attitudes we have become worse than Simon? Not just rolling our eyes at those who seek truth and forgiveness but actually blocking the path with walls of finger-pointing, eye-rolling and shame?

If we say 'yes' to those who are used to hearing 'no' – what will our friends think, what will become of The Church? People.... could leave.

So we leave the door propped open, allowing them to be on the outskirts of the party... find their own way in... if they must. But we are sure to keep our distance.

As they reach for their alabaster jars of questions – full of passion for the Truth – we keep them from the feet of Jesus deeming them unworthy. "How *dare* they approach. Don't worry Jesus, *we'll* protect you."

Fools. For when we distance ourselves from them, we distance ourselves from Jesus himself.

"Jesus offers forgiveness and acceptance that lifts the heavy burden of shame, allows the forgiveness of self, and offers the freedom of authentic life lived in love and gratitude⁸." When we stand in the way of someone else, we also deny ourselves.

And so I ask each and every one of us gathered in this room – what is it going to be? Do we languish in the order of the day, carefully marking what looks right and must be wrong or do we dive at the feet of mercy; pouring out love, erring on the side of grace?

When we ascend to the throne and Christ looks at those who are gathered at his feet will our backs be turned, so concerned with guarding Him that we forget to love Him?

Or will we be there pouring out our love and trust; bathing in God's faithfulness and forgiveness, not caring who else may be splashed in the process.

And if it is the latter....

If the choice is made for love and trust; for faithfulness and forgiveness...

How beautiful the jar...

How sweet the ointment...

How pure the love that will be bestowed upon us as we hear the words....

Your faith has saved you; go in peace.

In the Name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹ Tip of the Halo to the Reverend Dr. Anna P. Straight who helped me set the stage in this sermon.

² James L. Mays, Series Editor. *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. "Luke" by Fred Craddock. [Louisville: John Knox Press] 1990, page 104.

³ Leander E. Keck, New Testament Editor, *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. IX, "Luke" by R. Alan Culpepper [Nashville: Abingdon Press] 1995, 168-173.

⁴ Leander E. Keck, New Testament Editor, *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. XI, "Galatians" by Richard B. Hays [Nashville: Abingdon Press] 2000, 237.

⁵ <http://www.upcch.org/modules/tinycontent0/index.php?id=97>.

⁶ James L. Mays, Series Editor. *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. "Galatians" by Charles Cousar. [Louisville: John Knox Press] 1982, page 55.

⁷ David L. Bartlett & Barbara Brown Taylor, eds. *Feasting on the Word*. Year C, Volume 3. (Theological Perspective). p. 143-4.

⁸ David L. Bartlett & Barbara Brown Taylor, eds. *Feasting on the Word*. Year C, Volume 3. (Pastoral Perspective). p. 140.