

### The Way of Love, the Way of Law

Luke 7:36-8:3

*“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 makes no distinctions. Rich, poor, men, women, powerful, ordinary, the religious and the irreligious, the respectable and the social failures—Jesus encounters all people with respect to their relationship with God. He sees all as susceptible to drifting from our relationship with the One who made us. Yet Jesus views us as capable of returning to that relationship and thus to our original, true self, the person God made us to be.

It is Jesus’ indifference to distinctions that frustrates the Pharisee Simon who has invited him to dinner. Jesus had issues with Pharisees, but he did not treat them as enemies. He appreciated their sincerity. It’s just that they were on the wrong track. They tried to make people “religious” instead of helping them become the human beings God made them to be. They were more concerned with being right than with loving.

Simon was probably hoping for a nice dinner and conversation with Jesus. Now his evening is ruined because of this woman who has come uninvited. She stands quietly weeping at Jesus’ feet as he reclines at the table, her tears wetting his feet, wiping them off with her hair. [No respectable woman would let her hair down in public, in the company of men.] She massages his feet with oil.

Simon can’t stand it any longer and mumbles under his breath: “If this guy were a true prophet, a genuinely spiritual person, he would know what kind of woman this is and would not let her touch him like this.” Jesus overhears Simon. He always overhears us when we mutter about this or that person we find distasteful or who disagrees with us about something. “Simon, I have something to say to you.” “Say it, teacher.” Jesus tells a little parable about one person who is forgiven a small debt and another a great debt. Which one would love the forgiver more? Simon responds that it would be the one who was forgiven the most. This is such a no-brainer that Jesus doesn’t even acknowledge Simon’s answer.

Jesus brings the parable home. “Simon, do you see this woman here?” Look, you invited me to your house, but failed every duty of hospitality. Yet this woman, despised by everyone, has not stopped expressing her love. Her sins may well be great and many. But she knows how to love. She has no illusions about herself, and this makes her open to God’s love. That’s where her love is coming from. Simon, Jesus seems to be saying, you may know a great deal ABOUT God, but this woman KNOWS God.

Our responses to other people reveal more about us than about them. Simon labels this woman as a sinner, separating himself from her and others like her. This reveals the sad state of his relationship with God. He has reduced his relationship with God to obedience to external things--religious laws, beliefs, and practices. But in reality, he is out of touch both with his true humanity and with God. This gives us a very helpful spiritual question to ask ourselves whenever we find ourselves making distinctions, separating ourselves from others: What is my response to this person saying about my own inner life--my insecurities, fears, judgmentalism, feelings of inferiority or superiority, festering hurts and wounds? This can open up a world of spiritual growth for us, growth in love. The walls we erect between others and ourselves are the same walls that block our intimacy with God and our true selves.

Jesus says to the woman, “Your sins are forgiven.” Now ALL the dinner guests are grumbling! First Jesus refuses to separate himself from sinners. Then he claims to forgive sins, something only God can do. Jesus ignores them and speaks to the woman again: “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.” Faith in scripture always means an attitude of the whole person, a complete opening of oneself to God in love and trust. Faith does not mean believing ideas about God or Jesus or the Bible or anything else. When Psalm 32 says “steadfast love surrounds those who trust in the Lord,” it is talking about faith as trust in God. That is the gate to God’s love. That is what “saves” us, what makes our lives whole.

Was Jesus saying that the woman’s love was a response to God’s having already forgiven her? Or did her expressions of love and remorse awaken God’s forgiveness in and through Jesus in that moment? I find it interesting that there is no “confession of sins” on the woman’s part. We should be wary of constructing some kind of formula for forgiveness. Scripture, if we read it closely, resists our attempts to reduce it to systems and programs for “getting saved,” as it were.

I suggest this. The woman’s love arises from a mix of deep emotions, strong spiritual sensitivities. She must be painfully aware of her status in the eyes of others. She probably looks down on herself. She has no illusions about her moral purity. She would not be invited into the Moral Majority. On the other hand, as lost as she may feel herself to be in the judgment of others or herself, she is in touch with God’s love that is more real than all that judgmentalism and moralism. I think she is attracted to Jesus because she senses that he really knows God and God’s love. She knew it was safe to come to Jesus in this way, that he would know the intentions of her soul, her spirit, and would not add his condemnation to that of others. The woman and Jesus both know that God’s forgiving love is always there, always given us, and that it is the only real

foundation for our lives. It is this deep awareness that gives rise to her expressions of love toward Jesus.

When Jesus pronounces her sins forgiven, I think he is stating what is already true. Her love of God and honest awareness of her humanity leads to her experiencing God's love as unconditional mercy. Her real experience of God intensifies her love. When we talk about the forgiveness of sins with each other, we are acknowledging what has already happened for all of us. We are simply pointing to God's love, compassion and mercy that are always there for us. This love surrounds us all the time, like the air itself. All we need to do at any moment is open ourselves to it, to breathe it in, and that is faith.

"Your faith has saved you; go in peace." Your openness to God's merciful love has brought wholeness back into your life. You can stop judging and condemning others and yourself. "Save" means making whole, healing. It is touching our relationship with God. It is not a product of our belief in some piece of doctrine or holding the right religious or moral ideas. That's the whole underlying theme of this encounter at Simon's house. It contrasts two basic views of life. Simon and his guests think that our relationship with God is built upon our conforming to some law or other, some religious practice or belief, or having the "right" view or "doing the right things." This leads us to divide up the world into sinners and those who are righteous, the pure and the impure, the good guys and the bad guys, as our current leaders like to say. It's pretty neat because we can always put ourselves on the "right" side.

Jesus, however, embodies the other view, that our relationship with God does not depend upon law of any kind, but our faith, our continual openness to God's merciful love. Our living is to be a response to that love. The wholeness, or salvation, of our lives is a matter of our living in and out of God's mercy and love. It is not "getting saved so that we can go to heaven," but being made whole so that we can live our lives fully here and now as God made us to live them.

This is very important. We fall into our own forms of Pharisaism, living out of obligation and formal obedience rather than love. Most of us are very sensitive to our own failings, frailties, and weaknesses. We tend to beat ourselves up about them on a regular basis. Most of us aren't hung up on certain kinds of religious or moral laws, things that in the grand scheme of things are fairly petty. But we conjure up other "laws" to lay on each other and ourselves. We construct our own version of what Christian life is supposed to be and pretty soon we have made it into a law with which we measure others and ourselves. So we stay in that cycle of feeling insufficient and constantly failing, while trying to make ourselves feel better by identifying others as "sinners," or at least as those who are worse than we are.

Jesus breaks that cycle. He invites us to live out of a real and honest awareness of ourselves, that we are neither all good nor all bad. We are a mix of

kindness and judgmentalism, compassion and hardness of heart. We have hurt others and ourselves, but we have also helped. We've done some harmful things, but we've also done some real good. But instead of telling us to "be good," Jesus invites us to receive the merciful love of God, to open our lives to God's love, that is, to live by faith. It is this humble self-awareness and awareness of God's love for us that shifts the whole foundation and motivation of our living from "being good" to loving—loving God, others, and ourselves.

In the end, I find myself meditating on this woman's tears. Where do they come from? Probably the same place our tears come from. Her sense of her own failures or shortcomings. Her hurt at the judgments of others. Her deep desire to live as a child of God. Her love of Jesus who embodies God's love. Her sense of relief and release at her experience of God as love and mercy. Sorrow and joy. Frustration and grace. Longing and fulfillment. Wherever the woman's tears come from, they come from love and her desire to love. And Jesus feels more at home with her than with his dinner host.