

The Woman Who Loved Jesus Most • Luke 7:36-50

Among the legendary stories about Abraham Lincoln is the account of his visit to a slave auction. He went to observe, not to participate. He watched the unspeakable indignities of selling and buying human beings. His response was a mixture of disgust, sadness and outrage. As he watched a young woman was brought to the block, her eyes and body language screaming defiance and hatred. She had been used and abused by her previous owners and anticipated that it would now happen all over again.

The bidding began and to everyone's amazement Abraham Lincoln offered a bid. As the price went up so did Lincoln's bids until the auctioneer declared him the buyer. He paid her price and walked over to where she was being held. All her animosity was focused straight at him. He looked at her and simply said, "You're free."

Dripping defiance and distrust she said, "Free for what?" Lincoln answered, "Free to do anything you want to do; free to go anywhere you want to go." Her appearance changed as she took in his words and realized he meant what he said.

Then he said it again, "You are free; free to go anywhere you want to go." She answered, "Then I'm going with you!"

Her emotions are much like those in a true story from the biography of Jesus recorded in Luke 7:36-50:

Now one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him, so he went to the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table. When a woman who had lived a sinful life in that town learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's house, she brought an alabaster jar of perfume, and as she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them.

When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman

she is – that she is a sinner."

Jesus answered him, "Simon, I have something to tell you."

"Tell me, teacher," he said.

"Two men owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he canceled the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?"

Simon replied, "I suppose the one who had the bigger debt canceled."

"You have judged correctly," Jesus said.

Then he turned toward the woman and said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet me feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my

feet. Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven – for she loved much. But he who has been forgiven little loves little."

Then Jesus said to her, "Your sins are forgiven."

The other guests began to say among themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?"

Jesus said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

The occasion for this story was a dinner party at the home of a well-to-do Pharisee, a religious leader in ancient Israel. If his house was typical of the homes of affluent people of that time, it was built in a square around a courtyard. Entertaining was done in that courtyard with the honored guests reclining on couches around a low table. They would lie on their sides, their feet bare, their heads propped up with their left hands and using their right hands to eat. Such dinners were often open to the public. The host provided cushions around

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the perimeter of the courtyard so that uninvited visitors would have a place to sit, watch and listen. Lots of people might come if the dinner guests were especially famous or interesting people.

One of the local residents who came that day to see Jesus was a person described as “*a woman who had lived a sinful life.*” This is a softer way of saying she was the town prostitute. She made her living selling her body to men. You can surmise whatever you want about her and her background. Perhaps she entered prostitution out of abuse or economic necessity or because of some psychological need or sexual passion. Whatever her background and reasons she was morally indicted as a sinner. She knew that what she did was wrong and she did it anyway.

Certainly there were people there, including the host, who thought that her showing up was as bad as it could get. They didn’t want her there. She was an embarrassment. But they hadn’t seen anything yet. What she was about to do was nothing short of astonishing.

She came up behind Jesus, near his feet. We don’t know why she came so close or what her original intentions were, but when she arrived at Jesus’ feet she lost it. Standing behind him she began to cry until she was sobbing, her tears falling like water from a fountain. Such crying is never silent. With the tears came the sobs and everyone looked her way. She cried so much so fast that Jesus’ feet were soaked with her tears. She fell to her knees and instinctively did something she was never supposed to do. She reached up and unfastened her long hair so that it cascaded down in front of her. Then she used her long hair like a towel to wipe Jesus’ feet dry.

Most of the guests were shocked. They didn’t want her there in the first place. Then she made a scene with her crying. Now she broke one of the cardinal rules of society—women kept their hair bound up for everyone but their husbands. Only young girls wore their hair down. Loose flowing hair was a sign of sexual impropriety. Even today, who would use their hair as a towel, especially to wipe the feet of a stranger? And, as if all this were not enough, she held Jesus’ feet and kissed them. Then she took out an alabaster container and poured perfume all over Jesus’ feet.

Many women wore these small alabaster flasks on chains or strings around their necks. Alabaster is a soft stone that can be fairly easily carved into a container. It was a form of jewelry to make women look attractive. Perfume was very expensive and used on special occasions or as the family’s emergency savings account. It certainly was never to be wasted.

She lost track of everyone and everything else in the presence of Jesus. She forgot where she was. She didn’t think of what was acceptable or unacceptable behavior. It was as if no one else was there except Jesus. She was awed. She was overwhelmed. Her behavior was shocking. She was out of control.

The host was harshly critical, not so much of this woman and her behavior but of Jesus for tolerating what she did. He didn’t say anything out loud but he thought to himself, “*If Jesus were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of a woman she is – that she is a sinner.*” He discredited Jesus for not knowing how bad this woman was and for allowing her to touch him. To him it proved that Jesus was not a prophet and certainly not the Messiah.

It makes us wonder why this man invited Jesus to his home in the first place. Was he an admirer of Jesus? Did he think so highly of Jesus that he wanted to be his disciple? Was his highest honor to have Jesus come to his home for dinner? It seems unlikely for he did not treat Jesus very well. A good host would have offered water to wash Jesus’ feet. Roads were dusty and foot washing was as common then as taking off shoes at the Parade of Homes is today. A good host would have greeted Jesus with a kiss, just as is still commonly done today in so many cultures. A good host would have put some olive oil on Jesus’ head as was the frequent custom for guests at that time. But, no, this host was no admirer of Jesus of Nazareth.

He could have been setting a trap. Many of his Pharisee friends were conspiring to trick and trap Jesus. The whole thing could have been a set-up to frame Jesus and take him down. But this was probably not the way it was because the host called Jesus “*Rabbi*” and that seems an unlikely thing to do if he were out to destroy him.

Perhaps he was a collector. Some people get

their sense of self-importance because they know a celebrity. It can be an ego and reputation builder to have an important and famous guest to your home.

Early in our marriage Charleen and I had a guest book we would ask those we entertained to sign. When I asked a man who was somewhat of a celebrity in our world to sign the book he wrote his name followed by a Bible reference: Acts 28:2. After our guests left I quickly looked up the verse in the old King James Version of the Bible, anxious for a compliment from such an important person. Acts 28:2 said, “. . . and the barbarous people showed us no little kindness.” We quit using the guest book.

Well, back to the man in our story. From what we know about this man’s thoughts and behavior, he considered himself to be pretty good. He pegged himself as better than Jesus and certainly better than the sinful woman. He was good and they were bad. It’s a good feeling to see yourself as better than others, especially when those people are famous and important. In fact, we often take a measure of delight in the failings of our leaders and celebrities because that makes us look and feel more righteous.

In Luke 7:40 we read that Jesus answered the man. Interesting, because the man hadn’t said anything. He just thought it. Jesus heard his thoughts and replied with a parable about two men who borrowed money they couldn’t pay back.

Borrower #1 owed 50 denarii. Since a denarius was roughly a day’s wages, he owed two months’ gross income to the moneylender. For most people that’s a lot of money. How much would that be for you? (Keep in mind that he probably borrowed the money because he didn’t have any money. Now he still doesn’t have any money and he owes two month’s income. He’s really in a hole that he probably can’t get out of.)

In those days debtors were often beaten and imprisoned. In fact, imprisonment for debt was and is such a common practice around the world that

the United States Constitution forbids it. Our alternative is bankruptcy. There are currently almost 2 million personal bankruptcies per year in America. In Jesus’ day they would have all been beaten and sent to jail. Imprisonment didn’t pay the debt, either. You were left in jail until the debt was paid. This took a debtor from bad to worse. It

was assumed that his family or friends would pay up to get him out.

Borrower #2 owed 500 denarii. That was at least 20 months of income. Not only was this man deeper in debt, he was deeper in trouble. The chances of a rela-

tive or friend getting him out of jail was little or none. He would likely be imprisoned or enslaved for the rest of his life.

In Jesus’ parable the lender did something so farfetched that this has to be fiction. It was so unlikely and farfetched that Jesus had to have made it up. The lender canceled both their debts. They were debt-free from then on and absolutely free. They must have been two very happy former borrowers!

The parable led up to a question for Jesus’ host: “. . . which of them will love him more?” The host didn’t have to be a rocket scientist to answer this question. It was obvious: “the one who had the bigger debt canceled.” The less forgiven the less the gratitude and love. The more forgiven, the more the gratitude and love.

One of the most memorable experiences of my teenage years happened on a Sunday afternoon. My father had a magnificent new red Chevrolet convertible; I had a little Volkswagen Beetle. My dad let me drive his car to a friend’s house. I took a back way down a twisting rock-lined mountain road. The speed limit was 45 mph but a friend had told me it was impossible to maintain 45 mph on that road and stay in the right lane. I knew I could do it. I was wrong. My friend was right. Going around the curve I crossed the line just as another car was coming up the mountain. I took out the side of that car from headlight to taillight. I smashed up the front of my father’s car so it

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couldn't be driven. The police came. I called home. My father immediately came in the VW. He told me to go on to my friend's house in the Volkswagen and he would deal with the police and the car. He never mentioned the accident to me again. Years later I learned that his insurance rates doubled for the next three years because of me. He never asked for the money. He never told me the cost. I was grateful. I am grateful. The less forgiven the less the gratitude and love. The more forgiven the more the gratitude and love.

But Jesus was talking about something far greater than smashed up cars or bankrupting debts. He was talking about sins of the soul and the forgiveness of God.

Jesus reminded his host that he hadn't treated Jesus very well. He hadn't given Jesus water for his feet or kissed him or given him a little olive oil for his head because he didn't think he needed to be forgiven. He neither sought nor received great forgiveness from God.

By contrast, this woman was keenly aware of her own sinfulness and she was overwhelmed with gratitude because of Jesus' forgiveness. So she gave him her most precious and valuable possession—the best she had. She loved Jesus. She was devoted to him. She didn't care what anyone else thought. All because her great sins had been forgiven.

The rest of the guests were stunned by all that happened. They asked the right question: "*Who is this who even forgives sins?*" The answer was

obvious. Only God can forgive sins. God had come to dinner that night. God had forgiven her sins. God had received her love and devotion. God had come to earth to save sinners. His name is Jesus.

But that's her story. Now let's bring this into our story. Who do we think Jesus is? What do we give to Jesus? How do we feel about him? Do we love him so much that we lose control when it comes to Jesus? Do we love him so much that sometimes it seems as if there is no one else in life but Jesus? Do we want to give him our most precious possessions? Then we must have received great forgiveness and we know it.

If you are more like the host . . . well, don't be like the host. Instead, let us all admit our sin, accept Jesus' forgiveness and love him with all of our hearts, minds, souls, possessions and everything else. Let us love him greatly because he has forgiven so much.

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