

NEW TRUTH FROM AN OLD STORY 12

"Anointing Jesus' Feet"

Luke 7: 36-50

Most good Television shows, and most good movies often contain a story within the story, or two or more different plot lines. The shows I most enjoy are those that weave more than one story line together, until the disconnected parts finally connect, and it all makes sense. Regrettably, many shows and movies being made today, never connect, and thus don't make much sense.

Today's text is a typical, story within a story. The larger story is not a parable in the classic sense, but within the larger story, Jesus again uses a parable to illustrate a point he wished to make. Let's hear it again:

³⁶*One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to have dinner with him, so Jesus went to his home and sat down to eat. When a certain immoral woman from that city heard he was eating there, she brought a beautiful alabaster jar filled with expensive perfume. ³⁸Then she knelt behind him at his feet, weeping. Her tears fell on his feet, and she wiped them off with her hair. Then she kept kissing his feet and putting perfume on them.*

³⁹*When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would know what kind of woman is touching him. She's a sinner!"*

⁴⁰*Then Jesus answered his thoughts. "Simon," he said to the Pharisee, "I have something to say to you."*

"Go ahead, Teacher," Simon replied.

⁴¹*Then Jesus told him this story: "A man loaned money to two people--five hundred pieces of silver to one and fifty pieces to the other. ⁴²But neither of them could repay him, so he kindly forgave them both, canceling their debts. Who do you suppose loved him more after that?"*

⁴³*Simon answered, "I suppose the one for whom he canceled the larger debt."*

"That's right," Jesus said. ⁴⁴Then he turned to the woman and said to Simon, "Look at this woman kneeling here. When I entered your home, you didn't offer me water to wash the dust from my feet, but she has washed them with her tears and wiped them with her hair. ⁴⁵You didn't greet me with a kiss, but from the time I first came in, she has not stopped kissing my feet. ⁴⁶You neglected the courtesy of olive oil to anoint my head, but she has anointed my feet with rare perfume. ⁴⁷I tell you, her sins--and they are many--have been forgiven, so she has shown me much love. But a person who is forgiven little shows only little love." ⁴⁸Then Jesus said to the woman, "Your sins are forgiven."

⁴⁹*The men at the table said among themselves, "Who does this man think he is, going around forgiving sins?"*

⁵⁰*And Jesus said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."*

Obviously, the two men who were loaned money occupy the 'story within the story' and their part in this drama was to illustrate Jesus' ultimate point about gratitude. But the main characters in this larger story are Simon the host of the party, and the yet unnamed woman who anoints Jesus' feet. Luke is once again drawing a contrast between this Pharisee, and this sinner, and guess which one wins? Like we have so often observed in this series, Jesus' parables turn an unconventional twist, into an insightful teaching moment, that, most of us at least, need to learn. Let's look then at the two main characters of today:

1. SIMON THE PHARISEE

No secret here, the story is about Simon, a Pharisee who invites Jesus to his house for dinner. Without going any further, we must ask, why? Why would a Pharisee invite Jesus to his house? There are a number of possibilities.

- 1) He might be curious about who this fellow was, and what he was teaching, and wished to discover more about him first hand. He might have been a soul mate to Nicodemus, another Pharisee, from John 3 fame, who seeks Jesus out at night to discover how he might get to heaven. We don't know for sure.
- 2) He might be a fame seeker, wishing to surround himself with the most popular figure on the current social and political scene. He may have had no spiritual interest, just wished to be associated with this becoming quite famous Nazarene, named Jesus.
- 3) Or more likely, and based somewhat on his 'thought' in verse 39; Simon may have drawn the short straw at the regular meeting of the Pharisees, in their latest attempt to catch Jesus in an arrestable moment, or wine-induced misstep or misspeak.

For whatever reason, he invites Jesus to his home, and then the screw-ups begin. First he fails to wash Jesus' dusty feet. The story makes no mention of other guests being slighted in this way, so we might assume it was intentional. Walking the dusty roads with skimpy sandals required all good hosts to provide a servant to wash the guests feet, but the honored guests, especially a Rabbi, would have their feet washed personally by the host, as a means of honoring his reputation. Simon calls Jesus a Rabbi in verse 40, but doesn't treat him as such in this practical sanitary courtesy.

Secondly, he fails to provide a spot of aromatic oil for his head. Again this practical anti-perspirant may have also been a reminder for all good Jews, especially the Pharisee type, of the OT blessing passed between generations, and between esteemed guests and hosts.

Thirdly, he fails to provide Jesus with the greatest sign or show of respect upon the entrance of an esteemed invitee, the greeting kiss. The host was required by Jewish law to place both hands on the shoulders of his guest and kiss him on both cheeks. Did Simon just forget, or was he trying to snub or put down Jesus? You make the call.

This story appears also in Matthew, Mark and John, in a bit different version, though essentially it was/is the same story. In each of those stories, which appear directly prior to the last week of Jesus' life, much is made about the expensive waste of the precious perfume we'll hear about in a moment, but there the story is more closely tied with Judas, the betrayer, and treasurer of the band of disciples.

In Matthew and Mark, a mention is made that this Simon, the first character under study today...was a leper, listen: *"Meanwhile, Jesus was in Bethany at the home of Simon, a man who had previously had leprosy. While he was eating, a woman came in with a beautiful alabaster jar of expensive perfume and poured it over his head."*

This may not seem significant now, but it will...after we look at the second character of today's story within a story.

2. MARY THE SINNER

From Matthew's rendition we learn of Simon's leprosy, but in John's gospel the sub plot thickens and a new character is named, the woman who wastes the oil is Mary, yes Mary, the sister of Martha, the two famous sisters of one of Jesus' best friends; Lazarus. Back to Luke's account, our text for today.

This woman makes her way into the Men's Only club, who knows how, and positions her self behind Jesus, and begins to weep over his feet, wipe them with her hair, and anoint them with her most precious personal commodity, this extremely valuable perfume.

The contrast between Simon's snub, and Mary's extravagance cannot be overlooked, or missed. She washes Jesus' feet, she kisses them too. She anoints his feet and body with her own sweet smelling perfume. In the other stories, this anointing is mentioned as a prelude to his death. Remember that the hurried placement of Jesus' dead body in the tomb beside Golgotha, before the beginning of the Sabbath didn't allow the usual anointing required by Jewish law. This woman's extravagant sacrifice would have to suffice as the only anointing Jesus would get prior to his resurrection. Amazing.

Let me mention one more item, and then we'll draw some conclusions. Simon's disgust with this woman's action may have been embarrassing for him, partly because his personal slight was being outdone, by not just a woman, but a despicable kind of woman. You see, the only women in Jewish 1st Century Judea who would let their hair down in the audience of men, were prostitutes. So either Mary was engaging in an action that was not unfamiliar to her, or her passionate gratitude for Jesus' extravagant mercy in forgiving her sins, left her defenseless in the face of this opportunity to express her heart felt thanksgiving.

She vividly portrayed for all to see the undignified and unable to be bridled joy associated with knowing ones sins are forgiven. Her actions recalled David dancing naked before the Lord, Job shaking his fist in the face of God, Jacob with God in a headlock, Abraham with a dagger above his only son's frail body. She knew what Jesus had done for her, and no sense of modern decorum would prohibit her from expressing her expensive gratitude, though it could never repay what price had already been paid.

And that is the point for you and me. Who appreciates God's forgiveness more, the sinner who knows he is one, or the saint who thinks she ain't? How in the world could Simon, a former leper, a formerly shunned member of society, a social outcast who forced the rest of the world to cross the street in front of him so as to avoid physical contact with his open and oozing sores; be critical of a woman for touching a man, Jesus, who obviously had not only touched her, but who ultimately had healed him. Do you see the subtle plot lines beginning to connect? How dare he rebuff this woman for doing what he had failed to do? How dare he be self-righteous when calling her 'a sinner', when he had been delivered from his physical curse and nightmare? How dare he set up this quagmire to trap Jesus in his words, then become indignant when he himself gets caught in his own?

And we must not overlook this simple Mary. She has found a familiar place at Jesus' feet. Remember in Luke 10, Jesus' first visit to Lazarus' house? Martha is busy in the kitchen fixing some supper, and her good for nothing prostitute sister is ignoring her labor, instead choosing to be with the guys, and where is she sitting? At the feet of Jesus! When Martha interrupts Jesus' lesson with her begging for some help, Jesus utters the most condescending and understanding words in the NT: *"Martha, Martha, why are you fretting about so many unimportant things? Only one thing is really necessary, and Mary has chosen that good thing."*

It is no different for us today. Some of us maintain a hands off approach to Jesus. Oh, we'll sneak into his house every now and then, even every week, but we'll not wash his feet, or the feet of his dirty children. Oh, we'll put some pledges in the plates, but we'll keep our hearts to ourselves, thank you. Oh, we may even make Sunday School, or a small group, or even a ministry team once in awhile, or even every week, but we'll keep our wills to ourselves. Many of us are like Simon, healed lepers, but we don't want the world to know, so we hide behind our self-righteousness, we become Pharisees. We fail to honestly declare, ah heck, even remember who or what we really are. We don't have to be wrecked to love and appreciate what Jesus has done for us, but we are all wrecked, if we'd just admit it.

I suspect there aren't any prostitutes among us, even former ones, but I want to remind us that God doesn't grade on a curve; our pride is no better than dealing drugs. Our selfishness is no better than murder; our judging of others is no better than molesting children. Sitting at the feet of Jesus, pouring out our tears, wiping his feet with our hair, anointing his body with our most prized possessions reveals a heart of gratitude for all God has and is doing for us! How can we not be grateful? Our freedom, our forgiveness, our very existence have all been bought with a price, and to live in neglect of that reality snubs Jesus all over again!

All of us have sinned, all of us are sinners, but God sent Jesus to die on a cross that our sins might be forgiven. And I declare unto you; our sins (and they are many) can be forgiven. It behooves each of us to accept the gift of forgiveness and salvation. Jesus loves us, this we know, for the Bible tells us so. Come as humble and broken sinners, come as prideful and self-righteous Pharisees, then go in peace for your faith in Jesus Christ will save you! Let us pray.

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