

Good news
Luke 7:37-8:3

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Luke 7:37 - 8:3

One day, a Pharisee invited (Jesus) to come and eat with him. Jesus entered the house of the Pharisee and reclined (at table to eat).

At some point, one of the women from the city, a sinner, realized that Jesus was in the house of the Pharisee and that he was reclining (at a meal). Bringing an alabaster jar of perfumed ointment, she stood behind (Jesus), where his feet were. She sobbed (as she stood there). Then she began to bathe his feet with her tears. After that, she dried his feet off with the hair of her head, all the while covering his feet with her kisses. Then she anointed his feet with the perfumed ointment.

When the Pharisee who had invited Jesus saw all of this, he said to himself: 'If this man really were a prophet, he would have realized what kind of a woman this is who is touching him, that she is a sinner.'

Jesus answered and said to him: 'Simon, I have something to tell you.' He said: 'Go ahead, teacher.' (Jesus said): 'There were two men who owed money to a money-lender. The first of the two owed 500 denarii; the second owed 50. But, the two debtors could not repay the money-lender. So, as a gift to them, the man forgave them both their debts to him. Now, then, which of these two do you think will express the greatest love to the man who forgave them?' Simon answered: 'I suppose the one who was forgiven the greatest amount.' Jesus said to him: 'You have made the right judgment.'

Then Jesus turned to the woman but said to Simon: 'Do you see this woman here? When I entered your house, you didn't give me any water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair; you didn't give me a welcoming kiss, but she hasn't stopped covering my feet with kisses; you didn't anoint my head with any oil at all, but she has anointed my feet with a perfumed ointment. This is why I am telling you now: her sins, which were many, have clearly been forgiven, because, as you can see, she is expressing such a great love, while the one who has been forgiven little has expressed so little love.' Then he said to the woman: 'Your sins have been forgiven.'

Those who were reclining there with (Jesus) began to say to each other: 'Who does he think that he is even forgiving sins??' (Jesus) then said to the woman: 'Your faith has set you free. Go in peace.'

From that time on, he went from city to city and village to village proclaiming and announcing the good news of the kingdom of God. The 12 accompanied him, as did some women who had been healed from evil spirits and other diseases. They included Mary, called Magdalene, from whom 7 demons had come out; Joanna, the wife of Chuza, Herod's steward; and Susanna, as well as many other women. They all provided for Jesus and the 12 from out of their own resources.

“Good News”

We associate the “Word of the Lord” with “Good News”. And rightly so.

But, imagine the following situation.

You know that there is something wrong. You have started to feel terrible. Day after day it's getting worse. You can even localize where the pain is growing. You can even see it.

So, you say: I've got to find out what the problem is.

You go to a doctor, a specialist. 'Doctor, you say, here is what I'm feeling. Can you tell me what's wrong?'

The doctor asks you a few questions. 'What have you been doing recently? Any changes in your lifestyle? Have you started doing anything before this began? Aha, I see. What kinds of things are you doing now? Aha, yes, I understand.'

The doctor looks at you. You say: 'Well. Do you know what's wrong?' The doctor says: 'Yes, I do. Here's what's wrong.'

The doctor then proceeds to tell you exactly what you have. All your symptoms match what he is saying. He has even told you when you began to get sick, when you began to get worse, and why. Finally, he tells you that you are going to die relatively soon.

He stops speaking and continues to look at you. You are stunned. You look at him and say: 'Wow. Ok, what do I do?'

He looks at you and shakes his head: 'Look, that's not my job. I'm into preventative medicine, and, where necessary, diagnosis. I can only tell you how to avoid getting sick and, if you fail to do what I have told you to do, then I can tell you what you have, why you have it, and what it's going to do to you. But, no, once you're sick, you're on your own. Good bye.'

You leave the doctor's office not only stunned but completely and utterly deflated and dejected. You have been given an absolutely clear and compelling diagnosis, but, no cure, no resolution. You leave his office knowing that you are dying and even why you are dying, but he hasn't given you any remedy or anything that you can do to change your situation.

And you feel guilty for being sick: you know it's your fault, and there's nothing you can do about it.

Good news? I don't think so.

The Pharisees were specialists in preventative medicine and diagnosis of illness. They were doctors of the Law. They knew the Law of God. They knew why God had given certain laws, and they thought they knew what those laws were designed to do: to prevent illness. For them the law of God was like a check-list: if you avoid this sin, then the following won't happen. And if you are successful in avoiding sins, you will live a blessed life.

True, there were certain things that you could not avoid. For example, women have cycles and give birth to children, both of which render them unclean according to the law. But, these are temporary times of uncleanness, and after some days, they are naturally restored.

But, sins? No, they can be avoided and must be avoided if you want to be happy, healthy, and whole. You do not have to steal, or murder, or commit adultery, or covet. No, you may be a woman but you don't have to be a Jezebel! You can avoid these things. And you should, because, if you don't, it will be your fault and here is what will happen: you and those around you will get sick in a way that leads to death, and you will suffer and eventually die from your sin.

"What can I do about it?" you ask. "Well, you can offer a sacrifice and God may have mercy on you. But, there's no guarantee."

"So, there's nothing I can do?" "No, you should never have gotten sick. If you would have listened to me you would have been fine. Now it's too late"

One of these Pharisees, named Simon, lived in the little town of Nain where Jesus had brought the widow's son back to life, the story that you and I heard last week.¹ He invited Jesus to his house for a banquet. Why? Well, almost certainly because of what Jesus had done not only in Nain but also in so many other little Galilean towns. Jesus' reputation had been growing throughout this region of Galilee from the time that he had first preached in the synagogue in his home-town of Nazareth,² a mere 8 kms away. Since then Jesus had been preaching the good news to the poor, restoring sight to the blind, cleansing lepers, and then finally in Nain raising the dead to life. It was there and then that people started calling him a "prophet", because he had done something that was so similar to the kinds of things that both Elijah and Elishah the prophets had done in their day.

So, Simon, who already knew the Law, wanted to learn more from this Jesus, who, if he really was a prophet, would have special insight into the counsel of God. But Simon wasn't sure whether Jesus was a prophet or not. So he's very cautious. He doesn't welcome Jesus like an honoured guest, as if he were someone special. Simon welcomes him to check him out.

And then into the banquet comes someone who is very sick. Or at least that's how she looked to the Pharisees, who knew a sick person when they saw one!

The woman in the story does not have a name. All that we know about her is that she is sick, that is, that she is a sinner and remember: the Pharisees specialize in diagnosis, so we can be pretty sure that she was.

Perhaps she was a prostitute, or at the very least a promiscuous woman. Maybe she was the kind of woman that wives always steer their husbands away from.

In any case, she doesn't do anything to dispel the notion that she is a sexual sinner but instead does everything to confirm it. She comes into the banquet where all the men are lying down with their feet stretched behind them. She kneels down at Jesus' feet and starts to bathe Jesus' feet with the tears falling from her eyes. Then, she lets her hair down, which is the equivalent in small town Mediterranean cultures of someone in our culture taking off her blouse. She begins to dry his feet with her undone hair, to kiss his feet all over, and to anoint his feet with perfume.

Well! The Pharisees have seen enough of this kind of behaviour from women of this kind in other banquets on other occasions to know what this means and where this is going! Simon says to himself -- note: not aloud: 'Jesus would never have permitted her to do this to him if he really were a prophet. So, now we know. He's an imposter'

How did Jesus know what he had said in his heart? Well, you and I who do know who Jesus is also know that he is indeed much more than a prophet. And not only does he let this woman do what she is doing -- to which he'll turn in just a moment -- but he also knows what goes on in the heart, in the mind, in the soul. And so he knows what Simon is thinking, even if Simon doesn't say it aloud.

And so, Jesus tells Simon a short story, a parable. He tells Simon the story of two men who owe fairly large sums of money. One owes 500 denarii, the other 50. Since a denarius is one day's worth of wages, this means that in Jesus' story there are two men, one of whom owes someone about one and half year's worth of earnings, the other just under 2 months.

What do you earn per day? Let's be very generous and say you earn \$100,000 per year. If you were the second man in Jesus' parable, you would owe about two months of your salary, so about, \$20,000. But, if you were the first man in Jesus' parable, and you owed a year and half's salary, then you would owe about \$150,000.

Get the picture? Jesus says to Simon: There are two men carrying a debt-load. One has debts but can manage. The other will never make it.

¹ Joel Green and others believe that the house of Simon is in the town of Nain since there is no indication in the narrative of any change of scene from the story narrated in Luke 7:11-17.

² Luke 4

But then, the person to whom the debt is owed cancels the debt. It is a pure gift to both men who owe money. No strings attached.

Imagine that you are the second man in Jesus' story, who had a pretty large Visa or Master Card debt of \$20,000. You certainly sweat a bit with this debt load. You may even wake up in the night with a start wondering how you'll manage.

Then, suddenly, you get a letter from the credit-card company: "In the spirit of the Christmas season -- or whatever season it is -- , we would like to cancel your debt. Your outstanding balance with us is now 0."

What's your reaction? 'Hey, bonus. That's great. Let's have a party.'

But imagine that you are in way over your head. You owe \$150,000. The interest rate alone is adding upwards of \$15,000 every year to what you owe, until eventually the amount will be so large that you could never in a million years pay it back.

Who owes that much? None of you here is probably in this situation. People who do are people with serious problems: gamblers, addicts, people whose lifestyle is out of control. Most of you probably are not in major debt to a drug lord some place to whom you owe thousands, getting up to millions of dollars or to a gang or some other horrible group. People who are in these situations live in terrible fear. If you have debts, you may wake up in the middle of the night wondering how you'll ever manage. But, people who are in so far over their heads like this wake up in the night fearing that they are coming to knock the door down, and either drag you off to jail or kill you.

Then suddenly a letter arrives: "Forget about the money you owe me. I am cancelling the debt. Have a nice life. Signed, Carlos or Bugsy."

You probably think it's a trick. What's he pulling? This can't be true. You know that you are guilty. You know that you owe that money. So, why I am being forgiven this debt? What's going on? What's the trick?

Then, after a few days, or a few weeks, you realize it's not a trick, that you have your life back. How can this be? What's your response? After years of living in fear, do you think it will be the same as the one who just had his Visa bill cancelled? Of course not.

So back to the Gospel. Jesus told the story, then pointed Simon in the direction of the woman on the ground to make his point: sin is like a debt, except that it is a debt that is ultimately owed to God. Simon, you're like the guy who just owes a debt that he can manage. You have lived a pretty safe life, a life lived pretty close to the law of God. You know that you are a sinner but you are pretty sure that just by continuing to live close to the law and pay off your debts little by little, that in the end, you'll be OK. You say: "Yeah, I can do this. It'll be tough, but I'll just have to pay more attention to the law and live a better life." If somehow that debt is cancelled, you'll be quite happy, but nothing extraordinary. You'll still go on with your life pretty much as it was.

But, then there are those who are drowning under their debt, like this woman. She has sinned, and she knows it, and everyone knows it and keeps reminding her of it. The interest on her debt just keeps climbing. People like you are very good at reminding her that God is completely justified in bringing his righteous wrath upon her at any time He wishes. Now, if her debt is cancelled -- which it has been -- don't you expect that she will act exactly as she is acting? Look: she can't stop weeping, and she is completely and utterly unembarrassed to show how much she loves the one who is responsible for the cancelling of her debt.

Now, you'll note that Luke doesn't tell us how she been forgiven, or what had happened, or even who had actually forgiven her.

But, we know enough. We know from her actions and Jesus' words that she knows that Jesus has had something to do with the forgiveness that she has received from God. She couldn't possibly know the whole story, since it hadn't happened yet. But, she knows enough. That's her faith. That's what sets her free, Jesus says. She may not know

everything but she knows enough to connect the dots and the dots all point to Jesus, at whose feet she lies weeping while the Pharisees wag their heads in disapproval not even seeing that there are any dots to connect.

No, this woman could not have known what Jesus knew and what you and I now know because it hadn't happened yet. Her sin was somehow gone, the debt cancelled, but how? Her debt would be covered in the same way as the debts of every man, woman and child who had ever lived, was living then, and would ever live. By Jesus' death on the cross. That's why we're here, gathered around this altar this morning: to give our heartfelt thanks.

My friends, for years this parish has been the kind of place that welcomes people like the woman in this story: people who have laboured under the debt of sin and either have been freed or want to be freed. This parish welcomes all who would enter here in the name of Jesus who died to set us free.

This morning there may be some here who are still carrying debts like the debts this woman carried. Or there may be some here who are weeping at Jesus' feet, having had their debts forgiven.

You are both welcome this morning at this altar.

If you know your debt is forgiven, come in thanksgiving to the one who alone has been able to forgive you your debt.

If your debt is still there, then come to the altar, let one of us pray with you, and find healing for your soul and the forgiveness of your debt to God.

There may be others here this morning who say, no, I'm not like that at all. I'm more like the guy who owed 50 denarii than like the guy who owed 500. I'm not carrying a heavy load. I'm not a big sinner, but I do love God. Am I welcome, too?

Of course you are. Remember: in the Gospel of Luke it was the apostle Peter who was the first person to be called a "sinner", just as this woman was. And he called himself a "sinner" after that great catch of fish that Jesus gave him.

No, you don't have to be a heinous sinner to be a follower of Jesus. But, you have to know two things which Peter also had to learn.

First, you have to know that there will be heinous sinners who will come to Jesus and be forgiven by God and you will have to be willing to recognize the work that God has done in their lives without holding their past against them. Whether they are tax collectors, or prostitutes, or murders of Christians... if they find forgiveness through faith in Christ, you will have to welcome them. This may be very difficult for you, especially if what they have done is really bad.

Second, and this is going to be even harder for you: even if you're not a heinous sinner, you must to be willing to recognize that your sin, no matter how small, was also what sent Jesus to the cross. Jesus died for you, too, and because of you. I don't care how good your life is or how light your debt load with God: your sin alone was such that you alone, in your own strength, could never have saved yourself. Without God acting on your behalf, you'd eventually have gone under, no matter how upright, no matter how moral your lifestyle. You may not realize it because you may have had really good parents, or a person who prayed for you night and day. You may not know what your life would have been without God's love made known in Jesus. But, as Paul tells the Galatians: if anyone could have followed the Law, then Jesus would have died in vain. So, don't presume to be too good: you could never have been good enough to have avoided God's wrath without God having intervened to save you. That may be hard for you to believe, but it's true and one day you won't have just to believe me. You'll know that what I'm saying is true, when you say not in a mirror dimly but face to face.

Finally, there may be some here today who are more like Pharisees in our story. You may be here to check out Jesus and his followers. You may be excellent at diagnosis. You may have all the answers about why people are the way they are, why the church is the way it is. You may even have your own lives all figured out: why your wife is the

way she is, why your child is the way she is, why your co-worker acts that way she does. You may even have it all right. But, if you are unable to connect the dots and see what the woman in our story saw, and how the dots all point to Jesus, you will miss everything.

This morning you, too, are welcome to come to the altar. If you do, I want you to take your diagnosis and compare it with how much God loves those who owe so much and what it cost Him in giving up His Son for their sake. And remember, His Son gave His life not just for them, but also for you.

My friends, in the power of Jesus' name, St. George's will continue to be about transforming broken lives into world-changing disciples by the grace of God in Christ alone. We will continue to proclaim the good news of a God who is able to redeem all people from their sin and to transform our broken lives into those who will become world-changing followers of His Son, Jesus Christ, following Him on His way. This is indeed "good news".

So, now, come to the altar. And feed on him in your hearts by faith and be thankful.