

Because Jesus, we have forgiveness
Jubilee Mennonite Church
May 28, 2017

Purpose: To remind ourselves of God's radical forgiveness based in God's radical love.

Message: As people of God's loving, we are met with forgiveness in ways that we can hardly imagine, which is always stretching and scandalous.

Scripture: Luke 7:36-50 (I will read), Philippians 3:4b-14

Synopsis: Forgiveness is a tricky business. It always has been, and in many ways, always will be. Yet it remains a crucial, indispensable part of being whole people in the world. None of us can go through life without forgiveness or, in turn, our forgiving someone else. We often simplify things, even with God, to a fairly straight forward "say you are sorry" sort of formula that places God in the role of the punishing parent alone, and us in the erring child. So we say that if we pray the right prayer, do the right things, and make amends, then automatically we are then forgiven.

And while God's forgiveness is free and welcomed to all who seek it and embrace it, it is something more than the if that statement of precondition and expectation. Instead of God in Christ forgiving because of what is done, rather God comes and offers forgiveness often in spite of the damaging history of our actions and our intentions. God's love is abundant that it reaches out to us, valuing our selves often more than we ourselves do. And we know this because of who and what Jesus was and is in the world.

One of the Pharisees asked him
to eat with him,
and coming into the house of the Pharisee, he reclined at table.

There was a woman
who was from the city, a sinner, and she knew
that he was reclining at table in the house of the Pharisee.

She had bought an alabaster jar of perfumed oil,
and standing behind his feet,
weeping tears,

she began to rain on his feet
and, with the hair of her head, to wipe (them) dry;
and she was kissing his feet,
and she was anointing them with the perfumed oil.

And when he saw, the Pharisee who had called him said to himself,
This one, if he were a prophet,
he would have known
who and what kind of woman she is
who is touching him,
that a sinner is what she is.
And Jesus said to him:

"Simon, I have something to say to you,"
And he: "Teacher, speak, say."

"Two debtors owed a certain moneylender,
One was in debt 500 denari
and the other fifty.
Since they did not have {the wherewithal} to repay
he dealt graciously with both,
Therefore, which of them loved him more?"

And Simon said,
"I suppose
the one with whom he dealt more graciously."

And he said to him,
"You have judged correctly."

After turning toward the woman,
to Simon he said:

"Do you see this woman?

I came into your house
you offered me no water for my feet,
but she washed my with tears,
and dried (them) with her hair.

You did not offer a kiss for me,
but she from the time I came in
has not stopped kissing my feet.

You did not anoint my head with oil,
but she anointed my feet with perfumed oil.

For this reason I say to you:
her sins are forgiven,
abundant sins
for she loved abundantly. "

Bur the one to whom a scarcity is forgiven
scarcely loves"

Then he said to her:
"Your sins are forgiven."

And these reclining at table with him began to say among themselves:

"Who is this
who even forgives sins?"

He said to the woman:
"Your faith has saved you.
Go in peace."

-- Translation by Mary H Schertz

We see what we expect to see. Our brains, the marvelous creations that they are, are tuned to zero in only on the task at hand, filtering out the extraneous noise of the world around us to allow us to consider what we need to consider, and nothing else. Our perception and the tricks that the brain plays to allow us to see the world enable us to do what needs to be done, to keep our eye on the ball, sometimes literally, and nothing else. If you want to perform a trick on the brain, just get it looking the other way, distracting it from what's important and occupying the eye with what draws it. Were I much of a magician, I might try a little sleight of hand here, keeping your eye on the moving cards, and not the piece beneath. What we see is not all the time what we get; in fact sometimes it is the last thing that we get.

It is exactly this phenomena of perception on which this passage today turns, and it is exactly the same notion that our sense of forgiveness also functions. The happenings of these verses are a big deal, almost to the point that we often fail to get the point to catch on what is going on here. It must be pretty important as each of the four gospel writers report this incident or one like it (it is only Luke who places his accounting of the incident earlier in the ministry of Jesus, but we will just ignore that fact for today). Most of the time we tend to wonder what the big deal here really is—it's a devoted follower showing love and recognition to one whom she is obliged—a woman who loved Jesus was responding to him and showing him love. Sure, we might read of the woman with the perfume and the hair with a raised eyebrow or two, but for most of us, we encounter woman and what she does as generally benign.

But those are just our cultural blinders talking. The actions she takes here and the way that she goes about her business with the guest of the Pharisee is nothing less than revolutionary. First, she takes down her hair in a room full of men, a privilege reserved, in this culture for the marital relationship, at least among honorable women. Second, she anoints Jesus' feet, which is way out of bounds. The head is what is anointed, which is something that one might do for a king; the feet were just too lowly, too ill thought of to be accorded such an honor. Third, she is touching him, a single woman rubbing the feet of a single man, something that is not even closest friends would do. And then finally she cleans his feet with her hair, and altogether bizarre ending to bizarre act. With all this going on, there is little wonder that Simon the Pharisee is left wonder whether this Jesus really comprehends what is going on before him, like a good prophet

should. Can't he see who this woman is—what she is and what it would mean to have one such as this in the room, let alone engaged in such intimate activity with one who should know better.

But Jesus is able to see with different eyes, a different perspective what is happening here. I suggest that when Jesus stops following his parable to ask Simon whether he sees this woman, there is more than just an idle question to clarify who is being talked about (as if there could be some confusion). Rather, he is asking in a larger way whether his host is able to perceive who this is and what these actions really mean in this setting. And the reality is the Simon does not, can not really understand. He is looking for propriety, cleanliness and the right thing being done in the right way. He is looking for the penitential woman doing the right things to give her the right to be here doing this, which he strongly doubts. He is bound by his vision of the possible and of where people stand, who they are, of what is forgivable and what is not. He is blind to these actions of penitential meaning and the prophetic power of this gesture of love, gratitude, and foreboding. What she is doing is over the top, and if this one, this Jesus with his Parables and all the rest, if he had any sense of what was what, would know that.

Jesus has a perception that understands this abundant gift, a foreshadowing of the gift of abundance that would ultimately define his ministry, as what it is; an act of prophetic love from the woman in response to absolute love given. This woman, in the abundance of her sins, was able to love abundantly, love prophetically and completely, and encounter the abundance of grace which is found when we find ourselves at the feet of the master. Prophets are often things that we least expect, in the ways we least anticipate. They are always flying in the face of convention, acting out the message given them to carry, doing weird things to prove a point and deliver the word that they have received. Ezekiel ate the scroll of God to demonstrate to word of God on his lips. Isaiah walked around naked for days on end as an oracle to the nations. They are always picking dramatic ways to speak the truth given them to speak, the truth that often only they can see because they are looking for it.

And so does this woman of the city. She is acting prophetically because she is able to see the reality of grace extended to her. This is where forgiveness comes in. As a preacher, you can spend a lot of time talking about forgiveness, and well you should. If we are to live in this world, we must forgive; in big ways and in small ways. We must forgive, or suffer the consequences. With this in mind, the topics for speaking about forgiving is almost endless. We

can talk about rituals of forgiveness as a function of salvation. We can talk about needing to forgive so we in turn can forgive. We can talk about our need to extend forgiveness in our own self interest. But seldom do we take the time to speak of our need to perceive our own forgiveness that is right in front of us; the forgiveness offered by God freely and fully. We don't often talk about the need that we each have to know ourselves, fully and finally, as forgiven, loved, and embraced by God.

I think the forgiveness that we are most stingy with is the forgiveness we extend to our own selves. As much as we must and should seek forgiveness from those who we have done wrong, we should also, having achieved forgiveness from others, embrace that forgiveness for our selves too. It is one thing to accept that someone else has done wrong to you and you are in a position to forgive them for it at the right time perhaps. But understanding ourselves as forgiven, fully and finally, often takes some doing and proves the most difficult forgiveness that we can muster. It all boils down to perception. We assume the God is a whole lot like us; he forgives, but in the mechanistic of ways. There have to words to be said, oaths to be honoured and prayers to be made in order to set up the conditions for God to consider our pardon. We know what we would expect of someone who has done something bad, and we strongly suspect that God does the same thing. Our expectations of God is that God feels as bad about ourselves as we do, and can never accept us as we are. The theologian and writer Henri Nouwen observes: "Maybe the reason it seems hard for me to forgive others is that I do not fully believe that I am a forgiven person. If I could fully accept the truth that I am forgiven and do not have to live in guilt or shame, I would really be free. My freedom would allow me to forgive others seventy times seven times. By not forgiving, I chain myself to a desire to get even, thereby losing my freedom." We chain ourselves to God's desire to get even with us, and sometimes struggle to understand that we are indeed the one who Jesus died in love for.

The greatest blindness we have is often to the fact of God's forgiveness offered us in Jesus Christ. Note that in this story, there is nothing about the exchange with the woman that is conditional, requiring, or structural at all. Jesus simply reminds the woman that she is forgiven; that she too is loved of God, is a child of God, a fact that was well in place before she ever entered the room. Jesus speaks the truth that she most needed to hear, a truth that she was hoping for, and was ultimately expressing in her prophetic response: You are forgiven because

you are loved. You are forgiven because you are worth it. You are forgiven because you are part of God's good creation. Where she had so long looked and found only condemnation, disgust, and suspicion, even within herself, she was now able to find love, hope, and the foundational knowledge that she was loved by God. She did it then. We do it now. We expect that God feels just about as uneasy about us as we do ourselves.

Because Jesus, our perceptions changed and we are invited to see the world as it is, not just how we expect it to be. Jesus came and reminded us that in God forgiveness, full and free is found. It is the best possible news there is. I wish, how I wish I knew better how to believe it for myself, and how best to pass it on to you that you might too believe it. And I am not talking about some sort of acknowledgment prayer, I accept this sort of intellectualism here. I am talking about knowing our forgiven nature, our beloved status deep down and changing our way of seeing the world once and for all. Because if we would really know this ourselves, deeply and fully, we would know that it is true of everyone else just as well. Jesus came to demonstrate this to us, to break our perceptions once and for all to inaugurate the reality of God's forgiving nature here and now.

May we, each in our own way be given eyes to see past our illusionary perceptions and see the truth of the matter: that God loves us, and that makes all the difference. Amen.