

Luke 7:36-8:3: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Luke chapter 7 verse 36 to chapter 8 verse 3. One of the Pharisees asked him to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and reclined at table.

And behold, a woman of the city, who was a sinner, when she learned that he was reclining at table in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster flask of ointment. And standing behind him at his feet, weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears, and wiped them with the hair of her head, and kissed his feet, and anointed them with the ointment.

Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner.

And Jesus answering said to him, Simon, I have something to say to you. And he answered, Say it, teacher. A certain moneylender had two debtors, one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty.

When they could not pay, he cancelled the debt of both. Now which of them will love him more? Simon answered, The one, I suppose, for whom he cancelled the larger debt. And he said to him, You have judged rightly.

[1 : 0 8] Then turning toward the woman, he said to Simon, Do you see this woman? I entered your house, you gave me no water for my feet, but she has wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair.

You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore I tell you, her sins which are many are forgiven, for she loved much.

But he who is forgiven little, loves little. And he said to her, Your sins are forgiven. Then those who were at table with him began to say among themselves, Who is this who even forgives sins?

And he said to the woman, Your faith has saved you. Go in peace. Soon afterward he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God.

And the twelve were with him, and also some women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities, Mary called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Cusa, Herod's household manager, and Susanna, and many others who provided for them out of their means.

[2 : 1 5] In Luke chapter 7, Jesus has been accused of eating with tax collectors and sinners. And in the next, in the final scene of the chapter, he's eating with a Pharisee. There's a certain humour to this.

And this meal scene sets up a juxtaposition between Simon the Pharisee and the woman who anoints Jesus' feet. Luke is fond of male-female pairings, and perhaps this is another one that he is exploring here.

This incident is similar to an event recorded in Matthew, Mark and John in the final couple of weeks of Jesus' life. There, it is Mary of Bethany, who seems to be a member of the dinner party, rather than an intruder to it.

The focus there is upon preparing Jesus for his burial. The outrage is caused by the costliness of the ointment, not by the character of the woman. In each of the other Gospels, that story is also closely connected with the passion narrative.

It would seem, then, that we are dealing with a different event here. Simon, Jesus' host, is a Pharisee. We often see the Pharisees simply as the bad guys, but their identity is rather more complex and nuanced.

[3 : 17] Some Pharisees were faithful. In Acts chapter 15 verse 5, we discover that there were some Christians who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees. Paul calls himself a Pharisee, even after his conversion.

In Acts chapter 23 verse 6, While Paul's purpose here is part trolling, his self-identification as a Pharisee should probably not entirely be put down to that.

In this passage, Simon could have been a fair-minded person who still had to make his mind up about Jesus, someone like Nicodemus, perhaps. And Jesus seems to address him as such. However, his identity as a Pharisee does seem to be an important part of the framing of the story.

The Pharisees often oppose Jesus for a reason, as Jesus unsettled a number of their distinctives. The Pharisees' concern for ritual purity, for instance, is an important part of this story, as it is challenged by Jesus' teaching of radical forgiveness.

Simon the Pharisee invites Jesus for a meal. Simon here seems to be the generous host, an upstanding religious man of the city. But then a woman of the city, a known sinner, described in a way that represents her as a prostitute, comes in upon the scene.

[4 : 37] What happens next is nothing short of scandalous, not just to the Pharisee, but to most others. She lets down her hair, wets his feet with her tears, wipes them with her hair, kisses them, and anoints them with the ointment.

This is a familiar story to us, but we should recognise the scandalous character of it. This action, and even more so when performed by a known prostitute, has a distinctively erotic flavour to it.

A woman letting down her hair in that manner in that society would clearly offend sexual propriety. On the surface of things, the scene seems to be shamelessly sexual. Simon seeing this, thinks that this must be proof that Jesus isn't a prophet.

He is not acting as a righteous man in tolerating such practice and contact, and he clearly lacks insight into the character of the woman. Jesus recognises this, however, and speaks to Simon's thinking.

The cancellation of debts is a theme of the kingdom, and a model for understanding forgiveness. The extravagant cancellation of debts is something that opens up the possibility of a new way of relating, a way driven by liberated love, rather than by indebtedness, which drives so many of the ways in which we relate to each other.

[5 : 48] Forgiven a great debt, the released party is freed to respond in love. However, those who feel that they have been forgiven little can still implicitly operate in the framework of debt and its bonds and obligations.

Jesus gets Simon to cast judgement on his question. Then he turns to the woman to reveal the true nature of the situation, and this revelation turns the whole picture that the reader has developed to this point on its head.

Also perhaps upending the picture that Simon had of the situation, and the disciples. Simon, who seemed like the grand and honourable host, turns out to have been rather negligent in his hospitality.

As the guest of a great host, Jesus might have expected water for his feet, a kiss of greeting, and the anointing of his head with oil. And Simon performed none of these acts of hospitality.

However, the sinful woman performed the most extravagant acts of hospitality imaginable, performing far over and above anything that Simon had failed to perform.

[6 : 48] She goes to scandalous cultural extremes in her expression of her love. And we shouldn't miss this. She looses her hair, as she touches Jesus. She anoints and kisses his feet. These actions would be more sexually weighted than they are today.

She weeps openly. No respectable woman would do any of these things. They're much like David's actions in 2 Samuel 6, as he dances before the ark. However, she loves Jesus too much to behave in any restrained fashion.

She performs these actions on Jesus' feet, the most humble part of the body, honouring him in the highest way that she can. Jesus provides everyone with a different way of looking at things.

No longer does Simon appear as the honourable host, and the woman as the sinful intruder, performing an unseemly and sinful act, compromising the supposed prophet. Now Simon appears to be the negligent host, while the woman is the forgiven sinner extravagantly making up Simon's neglected acts of hospitality out of her profound love.

In this situation, Jesus is the prophet who brings forgiveness and healing to those outside of the camp of the righteous. In a way that shows up the unrecognised sins of the righteous themselves, revealing how little they love.

[7 : 59] Jesus declares that the woman is forgiven. We should presume that Jesus has already interacted with her in some form prior to this, as she seems to be responding to having been forgiven already.

Jesus' declaration of her forgiveness is not merely or primarily for her sake, although it would have reassured her. Rather, it is for the sake of everyone else. She is being publicly affirmed as one of the righteous.

The challenge is to everyone else to recognise and affirm this in their turn. We noted the sexual connotations of the woman's actions. While Jesus' explanation challenges the interpretation that something inappropriate and sinful is occurring, her actions still have a somewhat sexual character.

What are we to make of this? She behaves towards Jesus in a way that one could only ever really imagine a wife behaving towards a husband. In this, she recognises that the bridegroom has come to the feast.

Simon, who completely fails to honour Jesus, does not. She makes up for Simon's failures by treating Jesus in a way fitting for the bridegroom of Israel. The passage ends with the woman being commended for her faith.

[9 : 03] What does faith mean in this context? We've seen elsewhere in the Gospels that it involves persistent or pronounced confidence in Jesus' capacity and his willingness to save. Here it is seen not just in that, but also in an extravagant act of hospitality by which Jesus is received as the one that he truly is.

As we move into chapter 8, in the verses that follow, we learn that Jesus' ministry was supported by faithful women in much the same way as characters such as Elisha's were. The women who supported Jesus also seem to have accompanied Jesus and his disciples as they travelled around.

While the focus is usually upon the twelve, Luke wants us to know that they were only some of a larger group and that the women played an indispensable role and not just as witnesses to the death and resurrection of Christ.

We see many women in the life of the early church involved in aspects of its ministry, as patronesses of churches, as those who hosted churches, as those who were involved in various acts of mercy and things like that.

Within the cultural context, having women accompanying around such a peripatetic teacher might have been surprising to many. Jesus delivered these women from evil spirits and infirmities and illnesses and they ministered to his material needs.

[10 : 18] Joel Green observes, His graciousness toward these women is not repaid by their benefactions, rather his graciousness is mirrored in theirs. And in the twelve and in these women, we get a sense of the type of group that is forming around Jesus.

The most noteworthy woman in this group is Mary Magdalene. While many have identified Mary with the woman who anoints Jesus' feet in chapter 7, this identification seems incorrect.

However, associating the two figures in some way does seem appropriate. Both of these women are women who are marked out by their great love for Christ because of who he is and because of what he has done for them.

And it is the love of Mary Magdalene that makes her stand out later on in the story. We can so often be narrowly focused upon the question of the presence or absence of faith in the context of Christ's death, burial, and the uncertain period after his tomb is found empty that we fail to appreciate the significance of the response of characters like Mary.

With the death of Christ, it seems as though the faith of those surrounding him died with him, plunging them all into mourning. What makes characters like Mary Magdalene shine at this time is the way that their love continued to burn fiercely in the darkness, refusing to grant the darkness its victory.

[11 : 34] Impatient and enduring love, having lost all sight of her Lord, with faith and hope being utterly eclipsed, she waits out the night which promises no dawn. It was not faith so much as love which survived the long night of Easter Saturday, and tis Mary in whom this love is most visible.

One of the features of the gospel portrayal of women like Mary is their concern for the presence and the body of Jesus. We see this in the woman who anoints Jesus' feet, as we do in the way that Mary and the other women go to Jesus' tomb.

The male disciples are focused more upon Jesus and his mission. The women are more attentive to Jesus and his bodily presence. Mary goes to the tomb of Jesus, expecting to find his corpse, safely secured in its place.

Now that Jesus has died, at the very least she can express her love for him in the way that she tends to his corpse by bringing spices. John's gospel describes the tomb of Christ and Mary's visit to it in ways reminiscent of the Song of Solomon.

Jesus goes down to the closed garden chamber, the spiced chamber with the concealed fountain, a chamber that will be opened up, allowing its spices to be carried upon the wind and its waters to go out and bring life to the world.

[12 : 48] Mary is like the Shunammite, searching in vain to find her beloved, and then finally finding him in the garden. When Mary first encounters Jesus, she does not recognize him. He speaks to her, yet she presumes him to be the gardener.

Even as Jesus is present to her, he is absent to her perception, and she knows only the continuing absence of his corpse. If you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.

Jesus only truly appears to Mary when he calls her by name. As Mary finally recognizes Jesus in his loving address to her, Mary's faith, as it were, is resurrected. This occurs as a patient love, a love stronger than death, was answered by the voice of her beloved.

Just as Simon the Pharisee should have learned from the love of the sinful woman expressed to Christ in her anointing of his feet, so the rest of the church can learn from Mary Magdalene, from the stubborn devotion of her love that survives the death of Christ itself.

This woman who loved much is the first to see the resurrected Christ. A question to consider, what are some of the ways that we can follow the example of these two women, becoming people who, like them, are marked out by our love for Christ?