

Extravagant Love, Extravagant Mercy

Luke 7:36-8:3

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There are some stories we know and there are some stories we do not know. Last fall, I noticed on one of my early morning walks in the neighbourhood, that a particular house had about 6 of those very large garbage cans at the street on garbage day. I was horrified that 1 household would produce that much garbage in a week, for I soon noticed that the same number of cans were out every week! Do they not recycle? But even then, I could not come up with a reasonable explanation for how this could be. I felt pretty smug and self-righteous that we composted our fruit and vegetable scraps, recycled paper, cardboard, glass and tin, and only put out our garbage can when it was full, which was not every week--and it was half the size of one of their big ones! I judged that household to be highly wasteful and certainly not good caretakers of creation!

Well, just the other week, on my early morning walk, I happened by when people from that household were outside, and noticed that several people in wheelchairs were being helped into the van. It was then it hit me that this was no ordinary household, and later learned it is a group home.

I swallowed my self-righteous pride, and reminded myself that there are stories we know and there are stories we do not know, and the evidence at the curbside does not tell the whole story.

There are the public stories and the private stories. There are the stories people tell us when we meet them: he is a student; she is a lawyer; they are married; she lives in Goshen; he has 3 adult children. When we live in a community, there are the commonly known and public stories about people: she was the valedictorian for her class; he is the principal at the local school; their daughter was in that car accident where the drunk driver ran a red light; their grandchild was caught for shoplifting.

There are the stories we know, and there are the stories we don't know: that her calling to be a lawyer comes from a childhood caught in a cycle of

poverty and violence that fueled her vocational choice; that before he was principal he worked long shifts in a factory in another state in order to make enough money to feed his family and save for his own education; that the 6 garbage cans at the street belong to a group home for physically handicapped adults.

There are the stories we know, and there are the stories we do not know, and that's what struck me about our scripture story for today. There is the part of the story we know: Jesus was asked to eat in the home of Simon, a Pharisee; while he was at the table, a woman in the city, a sinner, came and washed his feet with her tears, dried them with her hair, and anointed his feet with costly ointment; that Simon was offended by this; Jesus told a parable about forgiveness; Jesus gently pointed out the ways in which the woman had demonstrated hospitality and Simon had not; and the woman's sins were forgiven.

But there is so much about this story we don't know: we don't know why Simon invited Jesus into his home; why he did not show Jesus the customary hospitality; whether and in what circumstances Jesus and this woman had met before; who this woman was and what the nature of her sin was.

There are stories we know and there are stories we do not know. Throughout history, the church has interpreted aspects of this story as if they were known. All of the Gospels include a story about Jesus being anointed, but in the other 3 gospels, the anointing happens close to Jesus' death, and is linked with anointing his body for burial. In 3 of these gospels, the host of the dinner is Simon, but in Matthew and Mark, Simon is a leper, not a Pharisee; in John the dinner is in the home of Lazarus. Only in John is the woman named, and there she is Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus. And yet, the story has been told as if the woman is Mary, and her sin is that she is a prostitute.

However, that is not the story that Luke tells. Luke tells the story of an unnamed woman who is a sinner, and he places this story early in Jesus' ministry, not linking it to his death and burial. Throughout Luke's gospel, people are identified as sinners, or refer to themselves as sinners: in chapter 5, after a long night of not catching any fish, Jesus instructs Simon and the

other fishers to go out to deeper water and put down their nets. When they do so, they have so many fish that the boats are beginning to sink. Peter says: Go away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man.

Immediately preceding this story, Jesus is addressing the crowds, and pointing out a discrepancy in their views of him: while observing that John the Baptist ate no bread and drank no wine, they said he had a demon; Jesus has come eating and drinking, and they say that he is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.

In these contexts, *sinner* is never interpreted as someone who has committed a sexual sin. In other contexts, when the word *sinners* is used, it denotes someone who is not faithful to God's law; or someone with a social or religious disease, based on birth, health or occupation; it does not necessarily denote a moral condition. So the story that we should not assume, is that this woman was a prostitute--as if sexual sins were the only sins a woman in the first century could commit. (Jeannine K. Brown, workingpreacher.org) The story that has been told by the church and society throughout history is the story that frames women as temptresses and seductresses. But thanks be to Luke for giving us a gospel in which stories of women as followers and disciples of Jesus are told. Luke tells a story that has frequently been ignored by the church; chapter 8:1-3 introduces the women followers in the same way as the Twelve are introduced in 6:12-16:

"Now during those days he went out to the mountain to pray; and he spent the night in prayer to God. And when day came, he called his disciples and chose twelve of them, whom he also named apostles: Simon, whom he named Peter, and his brother Andrew, and James, and John, and Philip, and Bartholomew, and Matthew, and Thomas, and James son of Alphaeus, and Simon, who was called the Zealot, and Judas son of James, and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor."

8:1-3: "Soon afterwards he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone

out, and Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their resources."

The story Luke tells is one in which a woman, whose sin is publicly known, arrives at the home of Simon, a Pharisee, and comes up behind Jesus and begins to weep, washing his feet with her tears and drying them with her hair.

There are some things we can infer about this story, and things that scholars have learned about this kind of dinner context from their studies of Middle Eastern culture. It was not at all unusual for important leaders to hold dinners with important visitors to town. The fact that Simon calls Jesus, "Teacher" in verse 40, would indicate that he was viewed as an honoured guest. The table is not as our tables today, but would have been very low to the ground, if not just a place on the floor for the food. The guests would have leaned on their left elbows, with their feet extended behind them, so the woman would have had no trouble reaching Jesus' feet. This kind of dinner would have attracted lots of on-lookers, people who would be interested in the conversation that was sure to take place following the meal; the buildings were more open, there was a lot of coming and going, and so it would not have been so unusual for someone to come into the house; in other words, she didn't break into the house, which we might envision based on how private our homes and dinners usually are.

What also becomes clear later in the story is that custom required that when guests arrived at a home, because they walked on dusty streets wearing sandals, their dirty feet would be washed by the servants. The host would also greet the guests with a kiss. Anointing a guest might also have happened and shows honour to them. Simon, the host, does none of these things. In fact, the accepted rituals of welcoming a guest weren't just overlooked, but callously omitted by Simon. (Kenneth E. Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes*, p. 5) Jesus frames the woman's actions, not as inappropriate displays of affection, but as acts of hospitality, the hospitality that Simon did not extend to Jesus.

We do not know why Simon did not extend this kind of hospitality to Jesus. There are stories we know and stories we do not know. What we do know, is that after Simon mutters that if Jesus were a real prophet he would know

what kind of woman this was who was touching him, sort of like the muttering I did when I saw all those garbage cans,--what we know is that Jesus tells a parable of a creditor who forgave the debts of 2 people. Both people would no doubt have felt grateful for the cancellation of their debt, but the one who owed 500 denarii, was freed from a lifetime of crushing debt with little hope of coming out from under it. The one who received that kind of freedom would certainly love the creditor a whole lot more than the other one.

It is at that point, that we get a window into an earlier encounter that must have happened between the woman and Jesus, one in which he had forgiven her sins, because he said it is because she was forgiven, that she is now showing such love and gratitude. We don't know her sin, but whatever it is, it is public, and it labels her. She is known, not for who she is, but solely for the one big mistake she made. How would you want to be known solely for your one big sin, your one big mistake? It doesn't matter what else you might have done that is great, or worthy; it doesn't matter that you recycle and compost; what people think about, every time they see you, is the one thing you did wrong. Or maybe it's who you are, the one thing about you that society has deemed unacceptable, or sinful, or unconventional, and that is what you are known by. And most likely, this woman has come to see herself only as the totality of her sin. She has let the community and her sin define who she is. And when Jesus says that she is forgiven, it's as if he has said to her, "Go and live fully and completely as God's beloved daughter; this sin no longer defines you; you are set free!"

She is set free, and out of that freedom, that new lease on life, she offers her gratitude in the only way she knows--with her tears. Her tears and her demonstration of love and gratitude are messy, and intimate, and uncomfortable, but when Jesus sets you free, you can't control or contain the joy and love and gratitude that wells up! Her actions courageously say to those around her, "I am loved and whole and that now defines me."

I really want to be like this woman, able to boldly approach Jesus, regardless of what others think, with my love, my tears, and my gratitude. And there are many times I am like her. But other times, I realize I'm like Simon, judging others by the stories I assume about their lives, by the evidence that

is placed at the curb, or the stories that are public and visible. Like Simon, I keep Jesus at a distance by seeing myself as "not a sinner", a fine upstanding church leader, a caretaker of creation, convincing myself that I don't need Jesus' forgiveness; I'm fine the way I am. But this story gently invites me, as it does all of us, to dare to approach Jesus and to live and love extravagantly. This story invites us to let go of our judgement and self-righteous muttering about the people and stories we do not know, and to lavishly and extravagantly love those whom Jesus loves and those whose stories Jesus knows. "See this woman?" Jesus is saying to us. "See how she loves me? I'm inviting you into that kind of relationship with me." Let's live and love God and others with such extravagance!