

Unravelling the Mystery of Jesus, Act 5
Love's Triumph
Luke 7: 36-50

**First Presbyterian Church
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As usual, her life was out of control. She had always been swept along by feelings and forces she seemed helpless to stop. She knew she wasn't like other people. Her life was like a house without a proper door. People just came in when they should have stopped. And not all of them were friendly. Sometimes, she just dashed out of the house of her life and into the world. A proper door might have made her stop long enough to think about the weather outside. To take precautions. To take care. So it had always been. And she was on her way to something crazy once again. But she had to see him. She just had to.

While she made her way through the streets, she watched people turning their eyes away from her. How long had it been since anyone had looked at her without first seeing the label of her sin blazoned across her face? Everyone in that tiny town knew who she was; there was never an escape. She had no relief. If only someone would come for her. It had been months since anyone had even spoken kindly. Was there ever a time," she wondered, "when I did not have the weight of these memories around my neck? Did I ever walk lightly through these streets? I am reminded always, every time I see someone, of who I am: a sinner. Joseph is a carpenter; Ruth is a seamstress; Ben is a priest; and I am a sinner. To them, I do no good. I have no occupation. I do not breathe or have needs or wonder about the weather like other people. I am simply a sinner. Touch me and touch sin. Speak to me and your tongue is filthy. Look at me and see the discarded."

Tonight, though, a flicker of hope sparked inside her. He seemed different. She had heard about the things he did. The way he spoke. Though she trusted no one, she thought she might trust him. She went to find Jesus. He was going to dinner at the house of Simon, a Pharisee. Such events normally were open to acceptable visitors. She would risk going; she could not help it. "What could a Pharisee do to me now anyway? Let him scowl; he does that all the time as it is. If only Jesus would let me near him; if only he might once look at me and see me for something other than my label, see the me behind my shame. One look; one touch; one word; I would give anything."

She brought with her an alabaster flask filled with perfumed ointment. It was one of the costliest gifts one could give. The expensive flask itself had to be broken in order to use the salve. It was a one-time, perishable gift, solely for the immediate comfort of the recipient. Worth about a year's wages. Once more, her life seemed out of control. She hoped to give this extravagant gift to a stranger who might well humiliate her.

The woman entered the house, passing the other guests, ignoring their whispers. She made her way to the table, and no one dared to stop her. At last, she found that she was standing behind Jesus. As was the custom of the day, he was reclining at the table. His legs were stretched out to the side of him. The woman had never seen Jesus before; she knew him as the only stranger, and by something else she could not name. He did not turn around. But she began to cry. Big, fat crocodile tears came in streams. Jerky sobs she could not stop shook her.

She wept for the weight of it all – for all the reasons she should not be there, for all that she regretted. Oh, the wretched heap of her life! And she cried that she seemed to have no choice but to be here. She was ever swept along by forces she didn't understand. And she wept all the more as she realized she was standing so close to Jesus. He had seen her now, and she was still there. He had not rejected her out of hand.

She wished that she could touch him; just the least part of him. And she saw that her tears were falling onto his feet, which were stretched out as he leaned on his side at the table. Then all her care in the world was for those feet. Her whole life, all her feelings and pent-up love fell in tears upon his tired, dirty feet. She pulled the clasp and let down her hair, defying the immodesty of it. She wiped his feet with her hair.

“Could I but soothe you for a moment?” she thought. “Will you have this comfort I can give? Do not turn from me now. Find ease from your travels; I can make your feet feel better. Oh, take my love. It is all I have and it is yours.” She kissed his feet and poured the perfume on them. She could see that its sweet smell did seem to soothe his tiredness. Her gentle touch tended Jesus with love and adoration.

For a moment, Jesus found ease in her gift. He closed his eyes to receive this brief comfort from the weight of his ministry. He did not dismiss her; he did not tell her to stop. Jesus did not turn away. He received her touch. And it seemed all the guests just held their breath as tension rose: how would this turn out?

We are in Act 5 of the story of Jesus found in Luke 7. This is the final act. This is where a life or death struggle will take place for the main character. Resolution will come, either for tragedy or triumph. This is where Jack frantically chops at the beanstalk while the giant descends. Jack had already made a life decision when he climbed the beanstalk. There was no turning back when he took the goose that laid golden eggs. It all went wrong when the giant woke up and started to chase him. Now it all comes down to this. Either the beanstalk will fall and the giant along with it. Or Jack will be caught and eaten by the giant. This is the time when a good storyteller builds the suspense and winds his audience up in knots. Everyone listening is shouting inside, “Hurry Jack, hurry!”

Now this episode from Luke 7 may not appear at first reading to have the high drama that involves life or death stakes. It’s quieter than a superhero movie. But the truth is, everything is at risk for Jesus in this moment. It’s life or death for the woman who brought the precious ointment. And life or death for Simon the Pharisee. For Jesus came to engage the powers that thwart human flourishing. In Luke 7, he defeated illness in a centurion’s servant and death in a widow’s son. He conquered the fears of John the Baptist even as he claimed that all the Scriptures pointed to him as the final fulfillment of God’s plans. Last week we saw how Jesus deliberately provoked resistance to his mission. He exposed the spirit of the age as being unpleasable, wishing God would do it all a different way. Now he is attacking the first enemy of human kind: *sin itself*. Sin is the human choice away from God. The deliberate actions that separate us from God and one another. What is his weapon in this final battle? The love of God. The love that *is* God. The love that Jesus himself embodies. Such love offers complete forgiveness even as it demands complete allegiance.

The social tension rose to unbearable heights as the woman wept and anointed the feet of Jesus with tears, hair, kisses, and precious nard. Such a scene would have been totally disrupting. Can you imagine having lunch at the country club with a senior financial leader while a woman dressed in short shorts and high heels comes behind you to wet you with tears and massage you with her hair? Wrong time. Wrong place. Wrong people. Wrong action. Wrong all around. Yet Jesus let it go on. The host was watching his dinner party get commandeered by a tart who had a thing for Jesus. Yet Jesus let it go on in spite of the discomfort among the guests. In spite of the gossip bursting to get out. In spite of being considered defiled himself by association with her sinfulness. Could he not have just said, “Daughter, I will speak to you in an hour. Peace now. Go to the temple square where I will find you.” But he let it go on.

Jesus received her. He received her extravagant gift. He received her touch. He received her in that immediate moment despite her poor timing, out of control life and shameful behavior. Stopping her would have been declining to be her savior. He could save the appearances but he would lose this soul. Jesus made the choice he would always make no matter the cost. He did in this moment for her just what he would do on the cross for all of us. *He took sin and returned forgiveness.* Ordinary people would be defiled by a sinner's touch. But our sin did not defile Jesus. Rather, he takes sin, absorbs it into his holiness, burns it up, and then offers forgiveness. He received the filthy touch in order to offer love's peace. This woman's sins were borne by Jesus. As she poured out her regret, her shame, her love, her hope, it was as if her very life was taken up in his. And so that life was returned cleansed, her sins were forgiven and her touch declared to be an act not of inappropriate impurity but faithful love. In receiving the sinful woman, Jesus defeated the ancient enemy of sin and its consequence of shame and separation.

But sin, the essential choice of myself over God, comes not only in the form of shameful acts. It also comes in the form of pride. It's the sin of good people. Self-righteous pride can be every bit as destructive as more blatant transgressions. Several years ago, psychologist M. Scott Peck defined evil as the refusal to acknowledge fault. Declining to admit my wrong, to confess my sin, leads to a prideful hardening of heart. Such a closed, guarded, ever-defended self leads to all manner of scape-goating, other-blaming, ostracizing, gossiping, revenge-seeking separation of ourselves from others.

So Jesus took on Simon's disapproval directly. The woman at his feet appeared to be the shameful one. But by the time Jesus was done, Simon was publically humiliated for his sinful pride. Jesus simply would not accept self-righteous condemnation of others. He exposed Simon for the pride that led him to neglect basic elements of hospitality toward Jesus. Little things say a lot. Look, it's just *those* people coming over. Don't serve in the crystal glasses. I don't want to wash them by hand. Use the cheap stuff. Hey, I don't want *these* people to stay forever, so don't make a dessert, just pick up one bag of Milano cookies. You see how this works? Simon didn't offer Jesus the customary washing of feet by a servant. But the woman had washed his feet with tears. Simon gave no kiss of greeting, not even an air kiss on the cheek. But the woman had smothered his feet with kisses. Simon offered no refreshing oil for beard and hair, but the woman had given the perfumed nard that could have cost a year's wages. Simon was exposed for a failure of hospitality to a guest. But more, for the failure to love the man who was God in the flesh. It was a failure of faith and a failure of heart. He who is

forgiven little, loves little. All caused by pride. Until those walls came down, Simon would be outside fellowship with Christ.

This story invites us to join the sinful woman in coming to Jesus with our whole lives. Our whole, compromised, out of control, wrecked lives. He will not flinch or turn away. We may spatter Christ with our dirt. It will not hurt him. For he has already taken that pain on himself. Being so accepted, we are then free to find our deepest fulfillment. To love Jesus with our whole hearts. To worship him knowing that our affection will be treasured. He receives us. He wants what we have to offer him. Even our poor praise will be prized. Christ's eternal love has defeated the power of shame and shattered the citadels of human pride. He has defeated sin at its core. And so his eternal love invites us to love him in return. His grace stoops to accept our halting, sin-stained touch as a dear act of love.

Doesn't your heart just want to open at his words "I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much." He turned to the tear-stained mess of a woman at his feet, lifting her into earthly restoration and into eternal life, "Your sins are forgiven. Your faith has saved you. Go in peace."

And that, dear ones is the conclusion of the story. That is the victory of Jesus. For those who offer Christ their sinful hearts, the final and everlasting reply is Peace.