

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost, Sunday, June 12, 2016, Year C

**St. Andrew's Anglican Church, Douglas, GA**

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ Rector

Scripture: Luke 7:36-50

***"The Alabaster Jar"***

The last two Sundays – we have been talking about the mercy of Jesus, His compassion and His love for His people – the followers of Christ. The Seventh Chapter of Luke continues – as Jesus is at the house of Simon the Pharisee. Even though there are many other people at Simon's house – the people this reading focuses on are Jesus, Simon the Pharisee, and the unnamed woman.

The host is a Pharisee who may not be completely opposed to Jesus – at least, not to start with. Pharisees had several different positions, one which we would call hardline right-wingers, but several, like Simon, ride the fence, may have been prepared to give Jesus a fair hearing. He has heard the rumors that maybe Jesus is a prophet, and so he calls Jesus 'teacher.' This calls to mind two other Pharisees who were devoted to Jesus. One snuck in at night; his name is Nicodemus, and Jesus told him the prophetic and most powerful words of John 3:16-21. *"For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believe in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life."* People struggle with trying to figure out how to be saved when it is right there in front of them. It is incredible to this 'is it really that simple?' Yes, it is! Believers of Jesus Christ who repent of their sins ARE forgiven! The other Pharisee was Joseph of Arimathea, who followed Jesus and gave his tomb for Jesus to be buried in.

Simon may have heard rumors that Jesus was a prophet and so he calls Jesus 'teacher.' He thinks he's got Jesus at a disadvantage because Jesus has not seemed to realize what sort of a woman this is, who is wetting Jesus' feet with her tears and drying His feet with her hair. But he is proved doubly wrong since Jesus knows what she has been and what she now is – a forgiven sinner – and Jesus also knows what Simon is thinking. It would seem that the woman is an uninvited guest. In Jesus' world doors would often remain open, allowing beggars, extra friends, or simply curious passers-by to wander in. It looks like the woman intends, to anoint Jesus with what is contained in this alabaster jar. And we learn that this is her expression of grateful love because she has received God's abundant forgiveness, but when she finds herself before Jesus she is totally overcome, and His feet are wet with her tears before she can get the ointment jar open. Then, trying to make things better, she makes them worse - as far as the onlookers are concerned: she lets down her hair, something no self-respecting woman would do in public, and she wipes Jesus' feet, kissing them all the while, and finally doing what she came for, anointing Him.

This Gospel reading shows what happens when God's love touches a human situation. We see, throughout Luke's Gospel, how social convention is thrown out of the window; forgiveness and love set new standards and raise new expectations of hope; human beings appear to be seen - not as society has 'labelled' them, but as God sees them. Many Jews had rejected Jesus' message but now many non-Jews or Gentiles were accepting it and becoming followers of Jesus, delighted (as was this woman) that their sins were forgiven by God's generous love, mercy and grace.

Taking a closer look at the details of this event at Simon's house, one of the things I just love is the way in which Jesus turns the tables on this Pharisee. Simon is the one who is guilty of poor hospitality – almost as much of a social blunder as was the woman's letting down of her hair. This Pharisee has never come to terms with the depths of his own heart, and so doesn't even appreciate God's generous love when Jesus, Himself, sits in person at his table. True faith is what happens when someone looks at Jesus and discovers God's forgiveness; and the sign and proof of this faith is love.

This woman, who very well may have been a prostitute, probably learned that Jesus was eating at Simon's home, so she went there. As I said before a meal such as this was not a private affair; people could come in, sit around the edges, watch what went on, listening to the conversation, and learning from it. And so, this woman could have gotten in, with her reputation probably preceding her and she would not necessarily be so welcome among this company of people. So she stayed to the back. It probably took great courage for this woman to walk in – in the first place. She brought with her an alabaster jar of perfume. Alabaster jars were carved, expensive, and beautiful, and they were made from a translucent, compact gypsum, carved with a long neck that had to be broken off so the contents could be poured out. This was an expensive perfume and so this jar of perfume would have been valued very highly as a treasure by this woman.

Then she knelt behind Jesus at his feet, weeping. You may be asking how would this be? Remember they were reclining at the table with their heads toward the table and their feet behind them. Her tears fell on His feet, and she wiped them off with her hair. Then she kept kissing Jesus' feet and putting perfume on them. Because these people were reclining as they ate, the woman could easily anoint Jesus' feet without even approaching the table. This woman understood that Jesus was very special. Perhaps, as a sinner, she had come to Jesus with a great deal of sorrow due to her sin. I have come to the conclusion that there could be a few things going on here:

- It could be that her sins were behind her even though she "had lived a sinful life", she had found God's forgiveness.
- Perhaps she had followed John the Baptist and had repented of her sins.
- She may have been in the crowds that had been following Jesus and had come to believe in Him.
- She may have come to Jesus - grateful for being forgiven and so offering Him the gift of her valuable perfume.

Despite this woman's reputation, she came forward publicly to Jesus and kept kissing Jesus' feet and putting perfume on them. Usually this perfume was used to anoint a person's head, but she did not want to get any closer to the table. To wash Jesus' feet was a sign of deep humility—it was the job of a slave. Think forward, if you will to Maundy Thursday in the Upper Room, when Jesus went to wash the Apostles' feet and Peter said 'no you are not going to wash my feet – I should be washing yours.' Jesus said '*the Son of Man to not come to be served, but*

*to serve.*” Simon the Pharisee looked over from his meal and saw what was going on — he saw this woman with a notorious reputation in his house, near his table, weeping and pouring perfume on the feet of his guest. He thought that any self-respecting rabbi would have realized this woman's sinful nature and retreated at being touched by her—since to be touched by a sinner would make Jesus unclean. This Pharisee decided that if this man were a prophet, He would have known who and what kind of woman this is and would have told her to go away.

Simon judged her as a sinner, shoved her aside, so no wonder Jesus' compassion and forgiveness gave a breath of fresh air to people such as this woman. Jesus cared when no one else bothered. Jesus spoke to this Pharisee answering all of the things that this judgmental man was thinking, and so Jesus spoke up: *"Two men owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he canceled the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?" Simon replied, "I suppose the one who had the bigger debt canceled."* *"You have judged correctly," Jesus said.*” (Luke 7:41-43)

Then Jesus hits Simon right where he lives with this, saying *“Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet.”* (Luke 7:44-46)

When people came into a house, they were to be treated as special honored guests, with their feet being washed, greeting Him with a kiss on each cheek, and anoint Him with oil – those were expected manners from the host of the evening, and they didn't happen and so Jesus called him on them!

- Did Simon maybe feel that he was too good to treat Jesus as an equal?
- Simon may have thought that he had correct religious beliefs and he followed all of the rituals to a tee, but he displayed an unloving, selfish and uncaring spirit.
- He was one of those who had rejected God's purpose for him, while on the other hand the sinful woman, lavished tears, expensive ointment, and kisses on Jesus' feet.

Now Jesus provides the haymaker to Simon! *Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—for she loved much. But he who has been forgiven little loves little.*” I cannot help but think of the Pharisee who stood in the synagogue and watched the tax collector. The tax collector was repenting and humbly asking God's forgiveness, while the Pharisee said ‘thank you God that I am not like this tax collector!’ This woman's act of humility and love shows that she had been forgiven. Jesus did not overlook her sins. He did, in fact, know that this woman was a sinner, and he knew that her sins were many, but the fact that her many sins were forgiven caused her to express much love for Jesus. It needs to be noted that this woman's love was not the cause of her forgiveness, for no one can earn forgiveness! Her faith in Jesus, despite her many sins, saved her. By contrast, self-righteous people, like Simon, feel that they have no sins that need to be forgiven; therefore they also have little love to show for it. The

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Apostle Paul says it so well in Ephesians 2:8-9 *“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God-- not by works, so that no one can boast.”*

- Simon saw the sin; but Jesus saw the sinner.
- Simon saw her offenses; but Jesus saw her need.
- Simon saw the depth of her depravity; Jesus saw the magnitude of her love.

Let's face it, the truth is that all people are sinners. That fact alone should keep anyone from feeling superior or self-righteous. God loves people, who are loved beyond measure and that should keep anyone from feeling worthless or hopeless. Time after time, I can tell you, of people who have visited my office in the eleven years that I have been a priest, and many times I have heard them say that they don't think very much of themselves. Their self-image is really, really lacking. I pray with them, and I anoint them, and one of the things that I pray for is that the next time that they would look in a mirror – that they would see themselves through God's eyes; that God cherished them, and loves them, must as He loves each one of us! He loves beyond measure!

Those who were sitting at the table with him began to say among themselves, *"Who is this who even forgives sins?"* Jesus' words of forgiveness to that woman sparked conversation since the Pharisees believed that only God could forgive sins, so they wondered why this man Jesus was saying that the woman's sins were forgiven. They completely missed the fact that Jesus, Himself, was God and therefore did have the authority to forgive sins. Jesus simply looked at the woman and said, *"Your faith has saved you. Go in peace."*

Think for a moment – this is not unlike the time that Jesus told the woman – *“Go and sin no more”* when people were about to stone her. When people put their trust Jesus Christ, He changes their lives, gives them freedom from sin, and allows them to *go in peace*—true peace, the peace of God that surpasses all understanding. There is a reason why we pray that at the end of the service – before the final blessing. Like so many whom Jesus had healed, this woman had a new life and a new reason for living. Isn't that something that each one of us has experienced; God forgiveness and a feeling that we are new people? The Apostle Paul put it today - didn't he say *‘that I have been crucified with Christ, I no longer live but Christ lives within me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.’* That is what the cross is all about! It is no wonder she wept with joy and love and indeed went in peace to love and serve the Lord.