

A Storytelling Commentary on Luke 7:36-43

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The story of the anointing of Jesus by a woman who came to dinner is present in all four of the Gospels. It is one of the most popular stories in the gospel tradition. Luke's version is highly distinctive. First of all, it is early in the Gospel rather than being associated with Jesus' passion, as in the other three Gospels.

In Luke's version, the incident is a sign of Jesus' extraordinary ministry of compassion and love for sinners. Furthermore, the setting in Luke is unique. The story takes place in the home of a Pharisee, a seriously observant Judean, who honored Jesus by inviting him to his home for a meal, a banquet.

In the last part of the story it is clear that there were a number of people present at the meal. It wasn't just Jesus and the Pharisee, it was a whole group of men who "reclined." There is some evidence to indicate that reclining only happened at major dinners. We're not sure, but at least it is an indication that this dinner was a major social occasion. In telling the story you want to create an atmosphere of a big dinner.

You can draw the scene with a gesture by indicating that others are present around the table where they are reclining. The practice of reclining for dinner was that every person sat on the floor with a cushion to lean on. There was a low table in the middle with various dishes that everyone could reach. The heads of all the men were toward the center, and their feet were out of the circle. Everyone in Luke's audience 2,000 years ago knew that practice.

Into this male world a woman came. She is not named. She is introduced as "a woman in the city who was a sinner." In the first century, that was code for being a prostitute, a sex professional. She is described as having learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's house. This is an inside view of her knowledge. The impact of an inside view in telling a story is to lead the listeners into identification with the character. So now, as we hear the story, we are likely to identify with the woman and feel sympathy toward her, even though we do not know her name.

Her action is one of the most extravagant expressions of love anywhere in the Gospels. She brought an alabaster jar of ointment; she stood behind Jesus at his feet weeping; and then she knelt down and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to wipe them with her hair. This implies that she let down her hair, which a woman only did in preparation for getting in bed with a man, usually her husband. Normally, women in that culture let down their hair only in private, only in the context of the bedroom.

Everything in this description is profoundly sexual. Bathing Jesus' feet with her tears, wiping them with her hair, anointing his feet with the ointment she had brought, and

kissing his feet are all associated with physical love. The story leads us as listeners into identification with what is happening and with her actions. There is no note of judgment or critique in what she is doing, but rather delight in it. It is important in telling this part of the story to communicate fully her spirit of love for Jesus.

The Pharisee sees what's going on and is offended by woman's highly sensual action, especially since she is sinner. He speaks to himself, and we are told what he thought. In portraying what he says to himself, use a tone of righteous indignation.

It is important to present the Pharisee's response as legitimate and sympathetic. There is no critique of him at this point, so don't sound judgmental toward him. There is merely a description of what he is thinking. It is a line of thought that the ancient audience would probably share. The extreme sensuality of the storyteller's description of the woman's action justifies Simon's disapproval, in the mind of the original audience.

It is most likely that the Pharisee is seated next to Jesus. As the host of the dinner party, he would be reclining close to the guest of honor. You can imagine that he is at Jesus' right hand. Therefore, the conversation that follows is somewhat private, man-to-man.

Jesus recognizes what the Pharisee is thinking and addresses him directly, beginning with his name: "Simon..." Jesus' response to Simon's disapproval is addressed to the audience as if the audience were Simon the Pharisee. First the audience is invited to identify with the woman, and then with Simon. So now they feel sympathetic toward him, as previously they did for the woman.

Jesus' response is to engage Simon in a rabbinic dialogue. He begins, "Simon, I have something to say to you." And Simon replies, "Teacher, speak." (The word "Teacher" is "Rabbi" in Hebrew.) The introduction makes it clear that there is mutual respect between Jesus and the Pharisee. This is a discussion between two men, both of whom value the Torah and the spirit of the prophets.

The amount of money that is involved in Jesus' parable may help to clarify what is at stake. In general, these financial calculations in Jesus' parable are based on the assumption that a denarius would be a working man's pay for a day's work. Therefore, 50 denarii would be a little more than two months of labor.

500 denarii, on the other hand, is nearly two years of work. Luke's listeners would have recognized the forgiveness that is involved as a really big deal with 500 denarii, so tell it that way.

The parable is told as a teaching story. It ends with Jesus asking, "Now which of them will love him more?" Simon's response is a respectful response: "I suppose it would be for the one for whom he canceled the greater debt." Jesus replies, "You've answered correctly," and then he turns to the woman, which is next week's story.