

## A Storytelling Commentary on Luke 7:44-50

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Jesus' parable is addressed to the audience as if the audience were Simon the Pharisee. It 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 the one for whom he canceled the greater debt." Jesus replies, "You've answered correctly," and then he turns to the woman. Now it's a little difficult to figure out how to do the motions of this in relation to the setting. Simon is either on the other side of the circle or he is next to Jesus, which is quite likely. Simon as the host would be reclining close to the guest of honor. You can imagine that Simon is at Jesus' right hand.

Jesus then leans back and invites Simon to look at the woman who is anointing his feet. The gesture which accompanies Jesus' words means, "Simon, look at this woman that is behind us, who is anointing my feet." The gesture implies a question: "Do you see her? Do you see this woman?" Jesus is not just asking, "Can you look at her?" He wants to know, "Do you see her, do you see her spirit, do you understand what is happening here?"

Jesus then describes the contrast between Simon's actions and the woman's actions. "I entered your house. You gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in, she has not stopped kissing my feet. And you did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment." This is an intimate conversation between Jesus and Simon. He is not criticizing Simon; he's rather identifying the difference between what Simon did, which is not unusual, and what the woman has done, which is extraordinary.

The norms of ancient Middle Eastern hospitality are in the background of this description. To extravagantly receive a guest is to do what Abraham did for the three men who came to his tent. He had his wife Sarah fix a great meal and he brought it to them. You can find this story in Genesis 18:1-15. Simon's dinner is in that tradition of extravagant hospitality.

Jesus is drawing the contrast between Simon's response and the woman's. Simon has done okay, but the woman has done far better than okay according to the norms of hospitality. The heart of the story is then Jesus' conclusion, "Therefore I tell you Simon, her sins, which are many, have been forgiven because she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little." This is not a critique of Simon, it is simply a description of the facts of Jesus' relationship to Simon and to the woman.

One of the primary issues around the interpretation of the story is the meaning of the Greek word here *oti*, which is in the sentence "her sins, which are many, have been forgiven, *oti* she has shown a great love." In the NRSV, this word, usually translated as "for," is translated as "hence." The issue here is whether or not Jesus is saying, "Her sins are forgiven **because** she has loved much." Was it her love that generated the forgiveness or had she already been forgiven prior to this dinner and was expressing her gratitude for the forgiveness through her gestures of love?

Everything in the parable indicates the latter interpretation: the love of the one who had been forgiven the greater debt is in response to the forgiveness that he has received, which is overwhelming. The love that is generated is in response to forgiveness. From the parable then, the clear conclusion is that what Jesus means is that the woman's sins, which were many, had been forgiven beforehand, and that she is expressing her gratitude.

Whatever the interpretation, the interaction between forgiveness and love is made explicit in this story. It is similar to the Lord's Prayer. There is a relationship between forgiving others and being forgiven. The parable is about the difference in the depth of love from people who have been forgiven much versus those who have been forgiven little.

The dynamic of this story is to change one's perception of the woman and to celebrate her gestures of love. That is what happens at the end of the story. Jesus turns back and speaks to the woman directly—it may be that he sits up or that he brings the woman into the middle of the circle. We can't know the specifics, but we do know that the gesture is one of intimacy. Jesus says to her, "Your sins are forgiven."

Then all those who are around the table say, "Who is this, that he can forgive sins?" This is the same as the response in Mark's story of the healing of the paralytic where Jesus says, "Your sins are forgiven," and the scribes who are present say, "Who is this man who forgives sins? No one can forgive sins but God" (Mark 2:1-12). Everyone would have known that. Jesus does not answer their question. Instead he focuses on the woman and says to her, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

This saying at the end—"Go in peace"—is a traditional blessing usually shared between men. In this story Jesus announces to the whole group of men as well as specifically to her, "Your sins are forgiven," which also means, "You are now included in the community of the righteous."

The sign of this inclusion of women in the community is developed in the next part of Luke's story (Luke 8:1-3) in which he talks about the women who traveled with Jesus and names them: women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities, Mary called Magdalene (not the woman who came and anointed his feet, in contrast to tradition), Joanna, Susannah and many others. The description of Jesus' band includes these women who were supporting him out of their own financial resources and were traveling with him.