

Sermon 16 June 2013

Luke 7:36-8:3

We've heard a lot about sexist remarks this week, and people, particularly men, treating women, including our Prime Minister, and members of the armed forces with disrespect.

Our gospel, therefore seems apposite. It is the story primarily about one woman, and how she is treated, by men, including Jesus. Perhaps it has something to say to Australian men and women of our times, our culture?

In this little gospel vignette, we have a number of players:

Jesus, of course,

the woman,

Simon the Pharisee,

the others,

Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out,

Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza,

and Susanna,

and many others, who provided for them out of their resources.

So what's it all about, this little story, with its embedded parable on forgiveness? And what does it mean for us?

Let's look at the players:

First, there is the unnamed woman of the city, a prostitute, a sinner, with the tools of her trade, an alabaster jar of ointment.

'She stood behind Jesus at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment.'

Luke 7:38

Not exactly the act of a respectable woman, is it?

'Unaccompanied women bearing such oils usually belonged to the 'sinners'. They were, like the toll collectors, disreputable, living at the margins and surviving, perhaps to a minor degree prospering, through their services - at least, enough to lay their hands on expensive perfume.

We do not have to paint her as poor and oppressed to justify Jesus' compassion. At the same time she might have experienced the lot of many women of the time, divorced or widowed and without a household to give refuge and support. Prostitution is not an easy choice, but she may have had few options.' Loader

...Disgusting really. Too much emotion, too much physicality, too much extravagant waste! What's she doing here anyway? What's going on for her? Jesus takes it as great love, because she is loved and forgiven. The others see it as sexually explicit seduction, and totally inappropriate.

She doesn't have a say. She doesn't need to, I suppose. She expresses herself quite eloquently non verbally. Jesus seems to understand, but her actions are open to misinterpretation, as we see.

I think she's probably totally in the moment. Present. Being. Focussing on the one who sets her free, who loves without condition. What do you think? Outrageous isn't it? Can you identify with her at all? Loved. Forgiven. Extravagant. Sorry. Over the top...

Jesus says to Simon the Pharisee, "I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little." Then he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven."..., "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

So, she is a faithful forgiven woman, if an embarrassing one. Though Jesus doesn't seem to be phased by her.

(William Loader ponders:

Jesus explains her great devotion as the result of her having already been forgiven, but then goes on to forgive her. Was she repenting? Then the parable of forgiven debts does not sit well. Was she expressing devotion in response to forgiveness? Then the tears of repentance blur the focus.

Were the storytellers somehow embarrassed? Some men might find erratic female responses of this kind quite scary. It is very interesting that the action had to be given so many different justifications. How

shall we cope!' Loader -
wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/LkPentecost4.htm)

And the host, the Pharisee, what about him?
Obviously he's been neglectful of his duties as a host.

Verse 44ff 'Then turning toward the woman, he said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? 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. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment.'

Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little." Then he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven."

He's been called to account, challenged. I would be cringing at this point. Like when Elijah challenges Ahab. Like when a dinner menu becomes public property.

I wonder if Simon reflects, I wonder if he thinks: "I have been super critical, self righteous, I thought to myself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him—that she is a sinner."v39 or did he think, "I, Simon am being embarrassed in my own home by this woman, and by Jesus response. What am I to do? Kick them both out? She is unclean! Disgusting! And, if I'm truthful, she is arousing. I can't stand it. It offends my morality."

Who is this Pharisee? What is Jesus doing at his home in the first place?

Perhaps Jesus was invited for a bit of intellectual discussion and debate over a meal, a meal that has now been derailed, gone way beyond polite conversation, gone to the heart of things.

What happens to Simon next?
Is he changed?
Is he convinced?

Is he outraged at being caught out in his own home?

Will he sue for wrongful dismissal?

We don't know. That is not part of this narrative. I could imagine a whole story around his life, but that is not for today.

Can you identify with Simon? What would you have done next? The gospel is not interested in that at this point.

Now we come to the main actor, Jesus of Nazareth, at home in this narrative, not shaken, it seems by the woman's actions, yet not letting Simon off the hook either. I wish the Christian Church was more like this. I wish I was more like this, at home in my own skin, open. At least in media coverage, we, the church, are portrayed as killjoys, and moral police, or abusers, criticising those at the margins, and in league with power.

Where would we place Holy Covenant, and ourselves individually in the story?

Does any one identify with the woman, a sinner forgiven much, an outsider, in gender and occupation?

Do you identify with Simon, self righteous, lousy host? Yet in there, and open to being challenged?

Or Jesus, at home in himself. Loving, accepting, challenging, not judging.

Or are you with the muttering crowd? "Who is this who even forgives sins?"...

Or how about the women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their resources?

Where do you place yourself?

And what can we learn from this little story?

The message seems clear – it is not who a person appears to be, but what they in fact do, that indicates the true nature of their character.

Loader comments:

'Jesus appears to have been able to meet women as people, as human beings, not to be avoided, not as sources of danger. We can only speculate that he must have escaped the syndrome of resentment and exploitation which often governed such relations and perhaps they still do..

As Christianity sought to find a respected place in city life, pressures grew to conform to social standards. Women's leadership which may well have been very prominent in early house churches fell within the strictures of acceptable patterns. Penitent women were approved and stooping became the appropriate posture.'

wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/LkPentecost4.htm

Is gender an issue to consider in who you vote for in our elections?

'When this story becomes the conversion of Mary Magdalene possessed by demons, beyond New Testament times, we have almost arrived where Jesus is the male saviour from the demonic female. This is not (yet) the case in the New Testament stories. Symbolism is beginning to overlay the occasion.

Underneath it all, however, is a moment of grace which invites us to the heart of the gospel. In Mark's gospel, Jesus identifies the story as a memory to be preserved wherever the good news is told. It is good news for women and good news for men. Forgiveness is part of that, as Luke intuits, but the message goes way beyond that.

It models and reflects the radical inclusiveness which Jesus lived and celebrated, in individual encounters, in meals, and in his visions of the future.

To avert the danger of implicitly promoting a lowly stance as appropriate for women, you may want to recall that in John's gospel Jesus made the stance his own when he washed his disciples' feet.'

Loader

Macrina Wiedekehr reflects on the anointing at Bethany (Matthew 26: 6-13)

in her book, *Seasons of Your Heart*, giving another slant to the story, she writes,

On some days, my heart fills up with questions,
and the gift of my life makes no sense at all.

I can still see that woman, bent over Jesus,
pouring out her expensive flask of perfume
for seemingly no reason at all.

What a silly thing to do!

Do not the scoffers have a legitimate complaint?

What is the point of such extravagance?

And who would think that one would become
so extravagant and wasteful,

as to pour out, not only perfume, but life itself?

It is what we are all asked to do

in our ministry. It has never made sense.

It's a little bit crazy, as is all love,

to pour out your life like that.

On some days, when my hope feels small,

I want to scream out with the scoffers,

“Why such waste?”

But on other days, when my eyes and heart are clear,

...I feel immensely lavish. I feel extravagant!

And with gentle conviction I proclaim:

“What a beautiful waste this is?”

A jar of perfume

poured out over Jesus

and a question is born:

What is the point of such extravagance?

Why this waste?

I don't know.

I honestly don't know.

But if this shocks you so,

prepare yourself

for you'll see more

more than costly perfume poured out.

You'll see lives poured out
given freely
used up
spilled out
wasted
for no reason at all!

Extravagance unlimited!
Lives poured out
handed over
lost
thrown away
for Jesus!

What is the point of such extravagance?
Why such waste?
Beautiful questions with no answers

and how sad if no one
has ever asked us:
why this extravagance?

Aren't you wasting your life on Jesus?

–Taken from *Seasons of Your Heart*, page 179-181
Macrina Wiederkehr–HarperOne Publishers

Today we will reflect on our strategic plan, and you may wonder how it relates to the gospel. I suggest that you consider our Strategic Plan's priorities, and whether they are inclusive, extravagant, as well as loving and forgiving

Susanna Pain
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