



Fred Mollon, Elder

## SERMON

# Great Forgiveness... Greater Love

Luke 7:36 - 8:3; Psalm 32:1-7

June 12, 2016

Skyline Presbyterian Church

There's a story that Martin Luther tells about himself. He was 21, walking to a village when a storm blew up and a huge bolt of lightning and crack of thunder knocked him to the ground. He believed this was a sign from God of how sinful he was, so when he got home he told his mother that he was going to become a monk. This was his first revelation. He joined a monastery, and studied, and a year later was ordained a priest and invited to celebrate the mass. His second revelation came as he stood behind the altar and realized what an awful little man he was and how dare he speak to a holy God. His third revelation came when he was teaching at the University of Wittenberg and first lectured from the Psalms, then a while later from Romans, and finally from Galatians when it dawned upon him. As he says, I was an impeccable monk, but I stood before God as a sinner and nothing that I could do would satisfy His need for justice. I finally grasped the concept that "God's justice was righteousness imputed by grace and mercy that justifies us through faith. Before, His justice filled me with hate, now it became sweet in inexpressible love."

This is what is shown to us today in our two readings. Psalm 32 is a psalm of David and it is called a penitential psalm. In the first two verses David spells out clearly that he is very aware of what it means to sin, on every level. Let's look at some of the words he uses.

- **Ashray:** First we have the word "blessed" or "happy." This is the word "ashray" which means much more than "blessed" and "happy." It suggests peace and freedom. It is an emotion that comes from being able to become what God has intended for us to be.

David then uses four very distinct words for what we would call "sin."

- **Pessah:** The first is transgression. The Hebrew word is "pessah" which means a willful disobedience, in particular to God and His commands.
- **Khata'ah:** The second is "sin." This word is "khata'ah" which means "to miss the mark," as when you shoot an arrow and it goes off course from that at which you were aiming.
- **Aiyon:** The third word is "aiyon," translated "iniquity." This literally means unrelieved guilt.
- **Rameeah:** Finally, the word "deceit" or "guile" is the word "rameeah" which means "self-deception" which is "the making of excuses so as to avoid the obligation of admitting your responsibility to clear your soul of guilt."

So these verses really read “Happy is the man whose willful disobedience is forgiven, who has missed the mark but it’s covered. Happy is the man onto whom the Lord does not heap unrelenting guilt, and in whose spirit is no self-deception so as to avoid responsibility for his actions.”

David knew this very well. As you read over the stories of his life, his reign as king, the battles and wars he fought, you see a man who very clearly was not perfect. At times he missed the mark; at times he willfully disobeyed God. He knew what it was to have guilt heaped higher and higher upon his shoulders, at times he even tried to deceive himself that he was okay and that Uriah’s murder and the rape of his wife wasn’t really his fault. David knew the depths of despair when the prophet Nathan came to him and let it be known that God knew what he had done. But David also knew the truth of the hymn, “Amazing Grace.” He knew the joy of being restored to full fellowship with God. He knew, like the prodigal son, the joy of his Father embracing him and shouting to all, “this is my son who was lost, but is now found,” and David became known as a man who was the friend of God.

In our Gospel story today we have these things reflected in two of the characters, the Pharisee and the woman.

Jesus is invited to the Pharisee’s home for dinner. Then we see that a woman, who is a “sinner”, comes in and begins to anoint Jesus’ feet with her tears, dries them with her hair, kisses them and then anoints them with expensive perfume. (I want to point out that the word “sinner” here does not necessarily mean that she was a loose woman, or prostitute. There were other things for which a woman, or any person, could be called a sinner during this time in history.

It sounds odd to us that at a dinner in this man’s home some random person would just enter and perform these acts upon one of his guests. We are told that crowds gathered outside of his home. This is no different than if the president were to come for a visit to your home. Of course crowds would gather to get close to him. During my time in Palestine I experienced this type of gathering many times. When we would go to a small village where tourists and foreigners did not go, it was always a big deal when we would come to one of our friends’ home for a visit. It was not uncommon for other villagers to gather around and stand outside of the windows to watch, or come in and either join us at the meal or just watch us. This is what is happening here. This Pharisee has invited this somewhat notable person, of whom many are aware, and in whom they have great interest, into his home for a meal. The people were curious to see Jesus up close and observe Him. One of these people who wants to get close is this woman. This is very similar to the woman who had the issue of blood and knew that if she could just touch even the hem of Jesus’ garment she would be healed.

We are told this man’s name is Simon and find that he considers Jesus to be a prophet of some sort. Then this woman enters and washes, dries, kisses and anoints Jesus’ feet. Simon very quickly lumps her into the category of sinner, pre-judges her, and thinks to himself, “if He was really a prophet He’d know what kind of woman this was and would think twice about letting her touch Him.” Simon immediately assumes that he knows more, and knows better, than Jesus.

So what is it that causes this kind of reaction in Simon?

- First, this woman has a very bad reputation, for whatever reason, in this town. Yet, she boldly enters this “righteous man’s” home to see Jesus.
- Secondly, touching of the feet was a very, very intimate action between two people.
- Then she lets her hair down to wipe his feet. This was something that was only done in the privacy of the home, not in public. It was disgraceful for a woman to show her hair in public to anyone other than her husband, or family members.
- Finally she takes an alabaster jar of ointment or perfume, one of the tools of her trade, and pours this very expensive liqueur on Jesus feet – a waste of money.

All of this pointed to the fact that she was a sinner as far as Simon was concerned, but Jesus had a very different reaction.

The first thing Jesus does is to ask Simon “Do you see this woman?” This is a hard hitting question because the answer is no, Simon does not see her. All he can see is the kind of person she is. He does not truly see the woman before him. Jesus sees her as an individual and this is one of the hallmarks of His ministry. He did not allow conventional arrangements to create barriers between Him and individuals, between Him and the people. Do we see beyond the stereotype and our prejudices to really see the individuals before us?

I remember a video that I saw recently. It was about a homeless man who was begging every day, by the entrance to a train station. He was being interviewed and was asked from where he had come to get to this point in his life. He told how he had once lived in the suburbs but then lost everything. Now he’s here and he stated how demeaning it was to have to stand there, with his hand out, begging for money. Some people cursed at him and called him lazy, and even worse things. The man said in spite of it all he had to keep realizing, “I’m not a bum. I’m a man, a human being.”

The next thing Jesus does is contrast how differently He has been treated by Simon, the righteous man, and this woman, a sinner. In the 1st Century sandals were the common shoe and walking along dusty roads in the heat your feet became dirty and sweaty. The custom was to offer guests a basin of water and towel to wash and refresh their feet. When an honored guest came into your home it was also customary to greet that person with a kiss on the cheek to show respect and welcome. Finally, it was also a custom to anoint their head with a perfume to again help them be refreshed and comfortable. Simon had done none of this, but this woman washes his feet with her tears; with her hair, dries them; with her lips kisses his feet, and finally anoints them with perfume.

Jesus then says that her many sins are forgiven as shown by her great love. This statement implies that her love began BEFORE she performed these acts. It was love that drew her, and it was God’s love that received her. Then because of that forgiveness, her love was all the greater, causing her to have great devotion towards Jesus.

Simon is a Pharisee. He is and has been a respected member of society. This woman by contrast is not respected and has lived in such a way as to be an embarrassment to

society. The difference between this woman and Simon is not that she has been a worse sinner than Simon, (all have sinned and come short of the glory of God,) rather it is that she has realized more truly and deeply the reality of her sin. Simon is still living in “rameeah,” that self-deception that keeps him from realizing his culpability as he stands before God. This woman sees herself as she is and realizes that she is the one who has disobeyed God; she is the one who has missed the mark; she is the one who is heaping guilt on herself and that she is the one who has been trying to make believe that she’s okay. When confronted with the man, Jesus, she has suddenly been caught up short and realizes that she wants to come home.

Isn’t this so like a child who has disobeyed his parents and deliberately gone off the mark? A child will soon realize that he wants to be in a good relationship with mom and dad. He will do anything to show that he is sorry. But what draws that child to those kinds of actions? It’s his love for his parents and that to be in right relationship with mom and dad is where he really wants to be because then he has peace and freedom.

This woman realized, in the light of Jesus, that she has sinned and really does love God and wants that right relationship. So, in faith, she steps out to show her true devotion hoping and trusting that she will not be rejected. It is her love that draws her but it is God’s love, through Jesus, that receives her. Out of that love she offers her acts of devotion by bringing to Jesus the only thing that she has – her shame and uses the most expensive thing that she owns to show her devotion.

I think that sometimes we either forget or just take for granted the great price with which God purchased our salvation and therefore our devotion to Him may be lacking. Sometimes we step into the place of Simon the Pharisee, and not only do we not SEE the people before us who have needs, but we try to make excuses for ourselves rather than owning up to our shortcomings. So great a gift of mercy, grace and forgiveness should produce in each of us an unending praise of love and devotion. From that place we can then enjoy with David, and this woman the words of the psalm, “You are my hiding place, You will protect me and surround me with songs of deliverance” and we will know that state of being happy, free, and at peace.