

36One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and took his place at the table. 37And a woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. 38She stood behind him 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. 39Now, when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, "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." 40Jesus spoke up and said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." "Teacher," he replied, "Speak." 41"A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. 42When they could not pay, he canceled the debts for both of them. Now, which of them will love him more?" 43Simon answered, "I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt." And Jesus said to him, "You have judged rightly." 44Then, 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. 45You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in, she has not stopped kissing my feet. 46You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. 47Therefore, 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." 48Then he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." 49But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?" 50And he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

1Soon afterwards, he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, 2as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, 3and Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their resources.

This scripture is about shame, sin, and forgiveness, the woman's, Simon's, and our own.

On to the story, Jesus is invited to dine at Simon the Pharisee's home. Ironically, he had just noted that religious leaders like Simon criticized him for being a drunkard and a glutton and that he was friends with tax collectors and sinners. But that doesn't stop Jesus, and at this dinner, he comes as a welcome guest of the traditionally righteous Simon. Jesus, as I have said before, is either at dinner, on his way to dinner, or leaving dinner many times in the gospel of Luke. And at each dinner, Jesus affirms his dinner companions as children of God by his presence with them.

As Fred Craddock once commented: You can measure one's faith not by who you are willing to feed, but by who you are willing to dine with. Jesus dines with everyone: Pharisees, hated tax collectors like Zacchaeus, and sinners of all varieties.

Next week we will celebrate the Lord's supper in the fellowship hall around tables. Jesus will dine with us and perhaps help us capture a bit of the sense of affirmation and mutual support we have for each other as we eat together intentionally with Jesus present.

Who was Simon the Pharisee who hosted the dinner? In Scripture, the Pharisees are individuals who strive to live highly moral and faithful lives, upholding God's laws with great rigor. They were seeking to establish rules to



prevent people from entering situations where they might break God's commands, thereby building a fence around the law and all the while trying to avoid association with those who break some portion of God's commands, sinners.

Indeed, wanting to keep the law, they would have been interested, though often opposed to what Jesus said. The Pharisees should be viewed as upstanding moral people with high moral and ethical standards. But like us, we must remember that they don't all think the same way; while some of them attack Jesus, many follow him. But many tend to be a bit or a lot judgmental.

Jesus goes to Simon's house and accepts the hospitality of the Pharisee and, according to the standards of the time, by his presence affirms him as a worthy child of God.

But then a woman arrives, crashes the dinner party, and begins to anoint Jesus' feet, wiping them with her tears and drying them with her hair. I imagine the guests at this dinner are shocked, probably more than shocked; they are mortified.

Who is this woman?

Many scholars throughout the ages have traditionally viewed this woman as a prostitute. Still, there is no evidence to support this; it may say more about the people who perceive her this way than it does about her, for there were far more ways to break God's commands and sin than this.

Still others have seen something sensual and erotic in her behavior, but according to tradition, the act of letting down her hair is more a sign of sorrow, mourning, or grief.

She probably heard Jesus talk about God being willing to forgive her sins, and she sensed through him that her many failures were not enough to separate her from God. In scripture, letting down one's hair is a sign of mourning. I see her behavior as a sign of hopeful and faithful penance. She is grieving her sinfulness and is grateful for Jesus' words of forgiveness and hope.

One thing about the Pharisees that is true of many of us is that they were somewhat judgmental. Simon certainly is. He judges the woman, and he judges Jesus, thinking he can't be much of a prophet if he doesn't know what kind of woman this is. Wrong on both counts

So, Jesus points out to Simon that he hadn't provided water for Jesus to wash his own feet, nor had he washed Jesus' feet, as a good host would do if he didn't have any enslaved people to do it. This was a traditional sign of hospitality.

Jesus said, "This woman has washed my feet and anointed them as an act of devotion; she provided the hospitality that you should have provided for me."

So, Simon is not off the hook either. Maybe he shouldn't be so judgy and follow Jesus' advice from Matthew 7:3-5:

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<sup>3</sup>Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye but do not notice the log in your own eye? <sup>4</sup>Or how can you say to your neighbor, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' while the log is in your



own eye? <sup>5</sup> You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor's eye.

Or “Before You Accuse Me (Take a Look at Yourself)”, a classic song written by Bo Diddley.

He then points out that because her many sins are forgiven, she shows much love. Notice there is no cheap grace here; he doesn't deny her sins, he says there are many, and he forgives them. The same is true for us, as Jesus reminds us that God will forgive us as well. By implication, Simon loves little because there was not so much to forgive. Or at least Simon thought. Indeed, he needed forgiveness, after all; although he was a righteous man, at times, he was judgmental and self-righteous.

Jesus tells the woman that her sins are forgiven, and her act of faith has saved her. Here is a powerful question that theologians have argued over for many centuries. Which comes first, faith or forgiveness? For me, the answer is yes. It is different for each of us. Some of us trust God deeply and know that if we sin, God stands ready to forgive; therefore, we repent. And some of us experience the power of God's gracious forgiveness, and this strengthens our faith and leads us to repent. Faith and forgiveness are a unity, and either one is a good starting place.

As you may have noticed, I have started including a confession of sin in the worship service for a while, and now I have moved it to where worship and liturgy specialists suggest it belongs: at the beginning of worship, as it prepares our hearts for the essentials of confession and forgiveness.

To play on the name of the old toy store that went bankrupt and is staging a comeback, Sinners Are Us - I need to be reminded of that as well.

I had left it out for a long time because I thought it made people feel bad and it was a downer for worship. However, the truth is that some people already feel bad, and we all know we have fallen short of what God wants for us and from us, and ignoring it is of no real help.

I don't mean to heap shame on us; many of us have too much of that already. We feel not that we have done wrong, but we are wrong; we are failed people beyond repair, and we are not.

We discussed this type of feeling at Brunch on Friday, specifically the checks on the report card from grade school, such as “doesn't practice self-control” and unsatisfactory in “follows directions,” which may stay with us for a long time, not on our record, but in our identity, which we keep in our hearts. I know they do in mine. That is why I believe so strongly in teachers; what they say and do can have a profoundly lasting impact, for the better.

Our confession of sin is a humble step of faith that enables us to approach God and know that God stands ready to forgive us. This knowledge that we are forgiven and forgivable enables us to live in peace, just like the woman. There are some people, like Simon, who need to be reminded that they have sinned and fallen short of the mark. However, if they examine themselves honestly, God will forgive them and help them change. Sometimes, like Simon, I can see others' sins but not my own, and we know what that yields: hypocrisy.

That is one of the biggest complaints about the Church by nones and dones (those who have no religion or are done with religion and church): we are hypocrites. I don't see it. I think it is a stereotype by people who don't know us, for we know we don't live up to God's high standards, much less our own. Hypocrisy is not our primary



concern, as we are open to learning about ourselves and our shortcomings, and we are willing to change them with God's help.

I think most of us recognize that we fall short of God's call, but we continue to strive and return each week to support one another as we try to live more faithful lives.

Even though we start with a confession of sin, even before that, we are greeted as saints. So, remember, we are both saints and sinners.

Or maybe we are just saints, for what is a saint except someone who knows they are a forgiven sinner? We are forgiven saints.

So, whether we are more like the Woman or Simon, we need to confess and know that we are forgiven.

Or many of us may be a little of both. Jesus doesn't overlook Simon's judgmentalism, lack of hospitality, and lack of loving acceptance, or the woman's sins. He calls out both Simon and the Woman. They both need to change. But remember, he calls to us out of love and calls to them because Jesus sees both of them and you and me as children of God. Reminding us that we are loved by a God who forgives us. And Jesus, speaking to us as God, reminds us that our sins are forgiven.

The woman knows she is forgiven. I hope Simon knows he is forgiven, and I hope we do too.