

**Forth Sunday after Pentecost
Grace Church of West Feliciana Parish
Saint Francisville, LA
12 June 2016**

Luke 7:11-17

Today's readings in Holy Scripture are filled with images of strong women, who became memorable in the history of Christianity, although for different reasons. In the Old Testament we have one more story of wicked Jezebel, who causes the death of an innocent man who dared refuse her husband. This is just one of the many acts of wickedness of Jezebel. We have read in the readings for the last couple of weeks about her killing of the prophets of God, her persecution of Elijah, her introduction of pagan gods to Israel, her ambition and cunning, etc. We could preach several sermons on Jezebel, but I want to look at the women in the Gospel story today.

We have two different types of women who show great generosity towards Jesus in this passage today. The first is the sinner who comes into the place where Jesus is having supper with Simon the Pharisee and his friends. This woman wipes Jesus' feet with her tears, dries them with her hair, and anoints them with ointment. The second mention of woman in the gospel is in the plural: there were women who followed Jesus and provided for him and his disciples out of their means. The behaviors of the woman at the meal and those of the women who followed Jesus were very radical and scandalous for the times, as we will see when we talk about the context of this great passage.

When you read in the Gospel of Luke that Jesus is at a meal, you know that a significant piece of instruction is going to be given. In Luke, Jesus uses table fellowship frequently as the setting for his teachings. In fact, Luke is the only Evangelist who shows Jesus eating with Pharisees. He gives us three different episodes of these types of meals and a number of other episodes where he eats with sinners. In each of these banquets or dinners we see a significant teaching (5:29; 9:12-17; 10:38-42; 11:37-41; 14:1-6; 15:11-32; 22:7-23; 24:13-35; 24:36-43).

The setting today is a meal to which Simon the Pharisee has invited Jesus. We then see a scandalous woman performing an outrageous act. The host is appalled. He thinks to himself, "What kind of a prophet is this. Why doesn't he know that this woman is a sinner. She is well known to us here. Her reputation precedes her. She is making a mockery of this great event. Why doesn't he

send her away?” This woman was a sinner, which could very well mean she was a prostitute. In Luke, there is no mention that the oil was expensive as in the other three gospels, which probably means that this woman was poor. By allowing a sinner to touch him, Jesus once again has allowed himself to become ceremonially unclean. Good Rabbi’s don’t speak to women of ill repute in public and they don’t allow them to touch them. In fact, the gestures of the woman are quite sexually explicit. She unties her hair, she kisses and caresses his feet. These are all intimate gestures that the host and his guests find objectionable.

Jesus uses the opportunity to teach about proper hospitality and about forgiveness of sins. The righteous Jew violated several hospitality rules by not providing a basin with water for Jesus to wash his feet upon entrance to his house. He did not provide a bit of oil for the weary traveler to refresh his forehead upon entering the house. He did not welcome him with shalom kiss of greeting, which is customary in Middle Eastern customs. The poor, sinful woman, on the other hand has provided all these things in an extravagant way. She assumes the role of a slave and washes Jesus’ feet, she uses whatever resources she has to buy ointment for his feet, she dries his feet with her hair, she gives him not just one shalom kiss, but covers his feet with kisses. Simon should not judge this woman for showing these great gestures of hospitality towards Jesus, when he himself failed to show even the most simple hospitality.

Jesus also uses the event to teach about forgiveness of sins. Who will be most grateful to the bank, the one to whom the bank forgave a debt of \$10 dollars or the one to whom the bank forgave a debt of a million dollars. Most of us would say that the one to whom a million-dollar-debt was forgiven has more reason to be grateful. Then Jesus looks at the woman and says to her, “Your sins are forgiven... Your faith has saved you; go in peace.” Jesus did not minimize her sin, did not rationalize it or tried to explain it away. He did not blame her sin others, on biology or bad genes. He did not say she was just a victimized woman in a male-dominated culture. he did not make her into a helpless victim. In fact, she called her a grave sinner. She is the one to whom much is forgiven. She is deeply stained by sin. And yet, her faith that Jesus was the answer to her problems leads Jesus to declare her justified, forgiven, restored. It was her faith that saved her, not the actions themselves as amazing as they were. It was the fact that she had the courage to break into a boys-only meal, drop herself on the ground, and cry away all her guilt and her shame at the feet of one who truly cared for her and who loved her in a way that no one else could ever love her. It was her surrender that led to her salvation and forgiveness. She acknowledged her sin and was truly sorry for her life and Jesus did the rest. Jesus forgave her the big debt. He made her free!

This, my friends, brings me to the group of women that followed Jesus and the disciples. Their names were Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna and many others. I have often wondered why these women followed Jesus all the way to the cross? Remember that Luke tells us that there were women who followed Jesus to Jerusalem and that these were the same women who cared for him and the disciples out of their own means when they were in Galilee. This was uncommon. In First-Century Palestine women don't follow itinerant teachers. They don't leave their communities and their families to follow someone across the country. In fact, women's movement is highly restricted in that culture. Most women lived in their villages all their lives and seldom ventured out of the immediate surroundings, and never unaccompanied by a male relative. So, why would these women of means follow and cared financially for Jesus and the disciples? I believe the answer lies in the word community! These women had been forgiven and liberated from their sin. These women had been cured from infirmities and evil spirits. They had been liberated from their distress. Now, there are times when a person who has been healed returns to the same environment that caused or facilitated the dysfunction, only to become ill again. Put a forgiven sinner in the place of temptation and sooner or later the sinner will return to his or her old ways. The only way to remain faithful to a new lifestyle is to break away from the old lifestyle.

These forgiven women were in need of community. They needed to be with other forgiven sinners. They needed a church filled with people just like them. A church filled with sinners who had placed their lives at the feet of the cross of Jesus and who accepted salvation as a free gift of God through Christ. A gift the Apostle Paul tells us is received "by faith and not by works of the Law" (Galatians 2:15-21). These women followed and cared for Jesus because they felt accepted, understood, cared for, loved unconditionally and included. These women followed Jesus and cared for him because they needed a place where they could be themselves without pretense, without masks, without guilt and shame, and without feeling sorry for themselves all the time. My friends these women in the Gospel today were extremely important to Jesus and to the early church. And there is much we can learn from them today.

Today I invite you to accept your sinfulness without excuses and to place it at the feet of Jesus. He is not ashamed to call you his friend. He loves you unconditionally and he wants to set you free. I pray that you will let him set you free today. Amen!