

Postures: Body

Luke 7:36-50

Good Morning Church Family and welcome to those of who are joining us online. It's good to be in the house of God together this morning.

It's hard for me to believe that we're already four weeks into Lent. Holy Week and Easter are right around the corner. During Lent, we've been exploring different postures that people in the Gospels have taken when they have an encounter with Jesus. It's my hope that these stories invite us to consider our own postures towards Jesus and the Jesus whom we encounter in our neighbours.

Our story for this morning is a bit of two for one deal in that there are two people who have an interaction with Jesus, but their experiences, their postures towards Jesus are radically different. In the scripture that Carrol just read for us, Jesus is invited to the home of Simon, one of the Pharisees, for a meal. These verses don't tell us how Simon feels about Jesus. I don't think that he was wholly opposed to Jesus or he likely wouldn't have invited him into his home. He certainly does regard Jesus with an air of suspicion, as we'll see later on. It's interesting that Simon is named character, often stories about the Pharisees just say, "a Pharisee" or "one of the Pharisees". Perhaps Simon was someone of standing, someone the early readers of the Bible may have known. There may have been an expectation on the part of Simon, for better or worse, that Jesus would come be a guest for a meal at his home-everyone of importance got a dinner invitation to Simon's. It'd be like the President of the United States making a trip to Ottawa, so of course the Prime Minister would extend the invite. Perhaps Simon is feeling a bit

magnanimous, he's invited Jesus, that slightly off-kilter rabbi to come and dine with his friends. Jesus should be thankful to be welcome among such auspicious company.

Then, in a wonderful Biblical plot twist, a woman in town gets word that Jesus is going to Simon's house for dinner and she decides that she too will be on the guest list. What do we know about this woman? The sources I consulted this week have been quite all over the place. Commonly, this woman is portrayed as sex trade worker, but there's nothing in the text that would tell us that for sure. The passage only tells us that she is "a sinner", meaning one who didn't keep the Jewish Torah Law. This is the same label that would have been used for tax collectors and the like. Regardless of her particular sin, one thing is the text is clear, this woman was an unexpected and uninvited guest. She makes her entrance into that room that was probably entirely filled with men. And she's already weeping; like full on ugly crying. She makes a bee-line for Jesus, kneels down behind him, and begins to bathe his feet with her tears and wipe them with her hair. She then proceeds to kiss his feet, and anoint them with an ointment that she brought in an alabaster jar. Likely, this is where biblical interpreters have come up with idea of her being a sex worker, because this gesture on her part is very forthright, vulnerable and just beautifully intimate. Luke describes her actions in detail because he wants readers to grasp that what's happening is quite scandalous, this woman is doing something very surprising.

So, our friend Simon, in this crowd of people around the table noticing what's happening and frankly, he's appalled. Maybe he's getting a bit nervous, as other people are noticing too. Are they going to think he's connected to this woman? But no, she's only paying attention to Jesus. It's like he and his other guests aren't even there. But this is his house! Why is she here? And for heaven's sake, why isn't Jesus saying anything?

The woman carries on with her weeping and anointing of Jesus and we read this in 39, “Now 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.” He said to himself. He didn’t say this to Jesus or even aloud. But Jesus knows, Jesus knows the heart of Simon and exactly what he’s thinking about this woman. So Jesus interjects, “Simon, I have something to say to you.” Jesus is about to reveal to Simon the state of his own heart, and the state of this woman’s heart. Jesus tells Simon, and all who are present, the story of two debtors, one who owed a little and one who owed a lot. Both have their debts forgiven. Now, Simon, Jesus asks, who do you suppose loved the forgiving creditor more? Simon answers, the one who was forgiven the most. Exactly. Probably the rebuke has landed on a very aware Simon, but Jesus makes his lesson to Simon, and to us, explicitly clear in verses 44-47, “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.””

In this story, we see two competing “postures”, that of Simon and the woman. Simon is guarded, distant, stoic, and proper. Simon doesn’t believe he owes this Jesus anything, as evidenced by the lack of hospitality that Jesus addresses. And then we have the woman, she’s up close, vulnerable, emotional, and improper. It’s a difference in posture of “I deserve to be in this room” and “I want to be in this room.” This story reminds us that Jesus knows our hearts- our intentions, our thoughts, our whole story. We cannot fool God. We can put up a very good front to others and even to ourselves, but God knows us deeply and fully.

The twist of the story, the aha moment that we must pay attention to comes at the end. Jesus has honoured the woman and rebuked Simon, and then Jesus says to the woman, "Your sins are forgiven." But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?" And he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

This woman was forgiven because, unlike Simon, she recognized her need to be saved, her need to be forgiven. Her debt was great and so her expression of love and gratitude was also great. Friends, as much as we, and I very much include myself in this, think ourselves to be Simon, we are all very the woman in this story. The question we're all faced with is not do I need Jesus, the question is do I realize that I need Jesus? For some people, like the woman, the realization of the need is clear and for others, like Simon, it takes longer to get there. Somedays I'm the woman, and others I'm Simon.

For me, this passage is rife with encouragement for us as followers of Jesus. Let's unpack some of the good news in this text.

First, we can grab hold of an honest assessment of ourselves. We all need Jesus. In the story that Jesus told Simon, both debtors needed their debts forgiven and that's what happened. We all get it wrong, we all make a mess of things, and we can all fall back onto the grace of Jesus.

Secondly, when we recognize and understand our own need for the grace and forgiveness of Jesus, then we can much more readily accept the failings and shortcomings of those around us. I have a friend, Meghan, who is a Pastor, and she has a co-pastor. One day, after a couple years of working with this other pastor, whom she is close friends with, he said to her, "You know Meghan, you're not that great. And I'm not that great either. I love you anyway." At first, this

comment sounds a bit rude, but when she tells the story she says this great moment in their friendship and their relationship and co-labourers in ministry. It felt like such a grace to her to be seen for her flaws, and loved anyway. In our story, Simon was not able to see his own need, so he felt very justified in judging this woman and Jesus, but when we see our own need for grace, it becomes that much easier to extend that grace to others.

Taylor has said, "I really thought of myself as a patient, level headed person, and then we had kids." Now, to be clear, Taylor is the most level headed, even keeled person I know, and I'm so very thankful for that. But we both certainly lost it when our two year old was screaming about not wanting to take a nap, when you know how desperately they need to nap and you KNOW how DESPERATELY YOU NEED THEM TO TAKE THAT NAP. The point is: we're human and at it's best our human shortcomings, our human need for the grace of Jesus in our lives gives us that much more grace, compassion, and love for our kids.

Further, recognizing our own need for grace and forgiveness opens us up to "ridiculous love", like the woman in our story. I say ridiculous love, not because it was laughable, but because it was lavish, over-the-top, extravagant, and some would no doubt say it was too much. Washing feet with tears? Drying them with your hair? It's too much! Most people I know get squeamish when churches hold foot washing services, so you can imagine this awkwardness ratcheted up by a whole lot. You want to see fear on the face of a Mennonite, tell them that the foot washing service is mandatory. Yet, that's exactly the point, the grace and forgiveness that God offers to human kind is ridiculous, lavish, over-the-top and extravagant, and that grace allows us to love others in equal measure. 1 John chapter 3 verse 1 says, "See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!" Friends, as children of God, where in our lives can we offer this love? Who in our lives and in the world needs to be lavished in the love of God? A friend? A neighbour? Yourself?

In this story, we also see an example of being vulnerable before God and one another. This woman came to Jesus, showed up uninvited to a dinner, and then made herself incredibly vulnerable before Jesus and in front of the Pharisees. She knew what the Pharisees thought of her. She knew how she would likely appear to the party guests, but she felt compelled. Her life had been changed by Jesus, she needed, knew she needed her sins forgiven and so she came to Jesus open and vulnerable in her mind, body and her heart. And Jesus saw that, spoke with such admiration of her love to Simon and others, and said to her, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

I think the truth here is two fold. First, we can humble ourselves before God and be vulnerable with one another in our relationship with God. Do we need God's help? Let's tell each other. Did God do something amazing in our lives? Let's tell each other. James 5:14-16 encourages this sort of vulnerability among believers, "Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective." Okay, so that's the first encouragement here, to allow yourself to be vulnerable.

And the second is equally as important, if not more so. We need to welcome the vulnerability of others; we need to welcome the vulnerability of others. Even when it makes us uncomfortable. Even if it seems over the top, extravagant or improper.

One summer, when I was in college, I was living at my parent's home and attending the church I grew up in. It was an evangelical church with a large stage up at the front where the worship

band would play. One Sunday, during the middle of a song, a woman came running up to the front, up onto the stage, shouting, her voice crackling with emotion. It was hard to make out what she was saying, something to the effect of saying, "it's so hard, Satan has got a hold of me, I knew I shouldn't have let him, I need help, I need prayer!" Even though it was an Evangelical church, this moment was startling, jarring. This was NOT a church given to emotional moments, like this, this was a church populated by good, stoic Norwegian people. What do we do? I'm not proud to admit this, but I looked down at my feet. This woman's vulnerability was too uncomfortable for me. But others in the congregation jumped to their feet, rushed up on the stage and surrounded this woman, wrapped their arms around her and prayed. I later heard through the grapevine that she was suffering from severe postpartum depression. How do we respond to vulnerability in our midst? I know that I want to be the sort of person who runs up on that stage to be present and pray, to welcome vulnerability with open arms. Let's not look away from the vulnerability that Jesus welcomes.

In closing, friends, we all need Jesus. We all need forgiveness. Acknowledging that need, just as the woman did, opens us up to Jesus and to one another. It frees us up to love openly, vulnerably, and lavishly. Great need. Great Grace. Great Love.

Amen.