Luke 7:36-50

36 One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee’s house and took his place at the table. 37 And 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. 38 She 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.

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.”

40 Jesus 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. 42 When they could not pay, he canceled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?” 43 Simon answered, “I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt.” And Jesus said to him, “You have judged rightly.”

44 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. 45 You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. 46 You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. 47 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.”

48 Then he said to her, “Your sins are forgiven.” 49 But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, “Who is this who even forgives sins?” 50 And he said to the woman, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.”
Lessons in Forgiveness

I’ve been a baseball fan for about as long as I can remember. When I was a child, the manager of my favorite team, the Baltimore Orioles, was a man named Earl Weaver. You’ve probably never heard of him, but you may have heard of the Orioles, because Kim Hyun Soo, formerly of the Doosan Bears, plays for them (and has been doing really well). Earl was a character—a little man with a big, fiery temper. He was famous for arguing with umpires and getting thrown out of games, as he surely was in the game at which this photo was taken.

In addition to his temper, Earl was also famous for his intelligence. In the way he managed, he was a man ahead of his time. In a time when most managers made decisions based on their gut (instinct), Earl kept meticulous records of how each of his players had performed in the past against the opposing pitcher. If one of the Orioles players had been successful against the opposing pitcher, Earl would be sure to bat him higher in the batting order so that he would have more opportunities to hit. If he hadn’t had much success, Earl would keep him on the bench that day and play someone else. This kind of record keeping enabled Earl to put players in the best position to succeed and keep them out of situations where they were more inclined to fail.

These days there are computer programs to keep track of these kinds of statistics, but Earl was doing it in the 1970s with only a pencil, a notebook, and a calculator. The way that Earl used statistics was just one reason among many that he was regarded as the smartest manager in baseball. When he retired, he shared his baseball wisdom in his autobiography, which was titled It’s What You Learn After You Know It All That Counts. The title was Earl’s way of confessing that as much knowledge as he had acquired, there was always another lesson to learn. The real learning begins only after you think you already know everything.
That is painfully true. I know firsthand. I entered college thinking I already knew quite a bit. I had done well in high school, and I wasn’t expecting college to be any different. The second semester of my freshman year I took a philosophy of religion course. It was the best of both worlds: I was interested in religion, plus it met a social science requirement. I’ll never forget the title of the course: Religious Dimension of Human Existence. It sounded weighty, but I wasn’t too concerned. How hard could it be? I had already survived Calculus my first semester.

The teacher, Professor Lindbeck, was a tiny woman with a bowl haircut and a raspy voice, the result of years of smoking cigarettes. She was sixty-five years old, already past retirement age, but she refused to retire because she knew that once she did, the school would close the religious studies department in order to save money. She was the only professor in the department. She was the department, but as long as she was there, the school couldn’t get rid of her and couldn’t shut down the department.

There were no exams in the class. Our grade was based on one or two papers and an oral presentation that took the form of a group conversation. Three or four students sat in the front of the class and for 15 to 20 minutes had a conversation about a religious topic. The topic for my group was philosophical arguments for the existence of God. The conversation was spontaneous. We were encouraged to go wherever the conversation took us. It was the first time I had done something like this, but I felt prepared. After all, I had done all the assigned reading, and I thought I was pretty smart. Whatever happened, I knew I’d be ready to handle it.

I may have felt ready, but the conversation soon revealed otherwise. I can’t remember the particulars of what anyone said. I just remember feeling completely out of my depth. I was prepared to spout lines that I had read in a book, while everyone else was thinking critically and spontaneously, engaging with the readings, not simply regurgitating (repeating) them. It was as if they were in speedboats with powerful engines, and I was paddling my canoe against the current. I slowly receded from the conversation, unable to keep up. Toward the end of the conversation,
noticing my silence, Prof. Lindbeck asked me if there was anything I wanted to add. I was drowning and she was throwing me a life preserver. “No,” I said meekly.

I thought I knew how to excel in the classroom, but I learned a valuable lesson that day, one that I’ve never forgotten. It was the same lesson that Earl Weaver, the manager of the Orioles, had learned on the baseball field. The lesson was this: It’s what you learn after you think you know it all that counts.

The scripture passage we read today is all about learning lessons. Jesus’ disciples called him rabbi, meaning “teacher,” and in today’s passage we see him teaching multiple lessons in forgiveness. As we’ll soon see, one person whom Jesus teaches is a quick study, but another is slow to understand the lesson. He doesn’t even realize that he is being taught a lesson. That’s because he thinks he already knows it all.

But before we jump into the story, let’s step back and try to see the bigger picture. I’m going to guess that this passage is familiar to you. You might even have a sense of déjà vu. Only three months ago I preached on a similar passage in the Gospel of John. The setting was the home of Lazarus, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. The woman who poured the ointment on Jesus was Mary, the sister of Lazarus. The setting was the village of Bethany, just outside of Jerusalem. The time was the Passover, just before Jesus’ arrest and crucifixion.

This story, or a version of it, appears in all four Gospels. Yet none of the Gospel writers tell it in quite the same way. Each Gospel writer provides his own unique take on the story [SLIDE]. Here in Luke, although the general outline is similar to how the story is told in John, there are several important differences. The setting is not Bethany but Galilee, far to the north. We’re not at the end of Jesus’ ministry but at the beginning. This is, after all, only chapter 7. The Gospel of Luke has 24 chapters. The woman who pours ointment on Jesus is not Mary, the sister of Lazarus, but an unnamed sinful woman. The home belongs not to Lazarus but to Simon, a Pharisee.
That last part may seem surprising. A Pharisee? What’s a Pharisee doing inviting Jesus to dinner? It must be a trap, right? Weren’t the Pharisees enemies of Jesus? Yes and no. The Pharisees often opposed Jesus, but they shared some things in common with him. Both the Pharisees and Jesus were interpreters of the law. Both taught the will of God to their fellow Jews. In fact, these similarities most likely explain why many of the Pharisees didn’t care for Jesus; they viewed him as a rival.

Yet this particular Pharisee, Simon, invites Jesus to his home for dinner. He seems sincere. There’s no hint that he’s trying to trick or trap Jesus, as the Pharisees sometimes do [SLIDE]. In fact, just before coming to Simon’s house, Jesus met some disciples from John the Baptist. They asked if he was the Messiah. As Jesus often did, he didn’t give a direct answer but instead cited the things that he was doing: healing the sick, giving sight to the blind, and raising the dead. Simon has heard the stories, but I think he wants to figure out for himself who this Jesus is. Is he the Messiah, a prophet, or just a pretender? What better way to get a closer look at Jesus than to invite him to a dinner party?

Yet not everyone who comes to the party is an invited guest. Among the people gather in Simon’s house there is an unnamed woman. She has not been invited, but she has heard that Jesus will be there. She’s not hungry; she just wants to see Jesus. She even brings with her a jar of ointment just for the occasion.

One way that cultures are distinguished from one another is in how they dine. We all eat, but we do it differently. In Western culture, we sit on chairs around an elevated table. In East Asian culture, people traditionally sit on the floor. In the Mediterranean culture of Jesus’ day, people reclined around a table. It would have looked something like this [SLIDE]. People positioned themselves with one arm leaning toward the table, and with the other arm they reached for the food. Their feet would have pointed away from the table.
That is how the woman is able to come up behind Jesus and kneel at his feet. As she kneels before him, she weeps. Her tears drip on to Jesus’ feet. No, actually, that’s not accurate. Luke says that her tears *bathed* his feet, which suggests not a simple teardrop or two but a rushing flood of tears. His feet become so wet with her tears that she dries them with the only thing she has available to her—her hair. She then anoints his feet with the ointment that she has brought with her.

It’s a scandalous scene on so many levels. It’s an act of outrageous intimacy. For a woman to touch a man who was not her husband or a family member was to break the social norms of that society. Not only does she touch Jesus, she lets down her hair to dry his feet. A woman’s hair was regarded as sensual, which is why women covered their hair in public (and still do in that part of the world). Finally, she kisses his feet.

Picture the scene [SLIDE]. The men—each one invited by Simon—are reclining around the table eating dinner. Then from behind Jesus a woman—a woman who was not invited to dinner, a woman with a sinful reputation—kneels at Jesus’ feet, bathes them in her tears, dries them with her hair, kisses them, and finally anoints his feet with ointment. She’s breaking every social convention in the book! The whole thing is shocking and scandalous!

One of those scandalized is Simon, the host. He had called this dinner to try to figure out Jesus of Nazareth. Who was he really? Watching Jesus let the woman touch him, Simon thinks that he’s found his answer. “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” (Luke 7:39).

This is the point in the sermon where you probably expect me to criticize Simon. *What a judgmental jerk!* But let’s try to understand Simon’s point of view. Simon was only being a faithful Jew. Judaism was based on the idea of separation [SLIDE]. Israel was a nation chosen by God to be set apart, made separate from the other
nations. Judaism was concerned with maintaining separation: Jew from Gentile, clean from unclean, righteous from unrighteous. If those barriers were crossed, if the righteous mixed with the unrighteous, chaos and confusion would follow.

Simon is a Pharisee. He knows the law. He knows that the law teaches the importance of maintaining separation. And he’s just witnessed this unrighteous, sinful woman touch this supposedly righteous teacher. A barrier has been crossed. Simon was wondering whether Jesus might be a prophet, or perhaps even the Messiah, and now he’s found his answer. To Simon’s thinking, if Jesus were a prophet, he would recognize this woman as the sinner that she is and keep separate from her.

I said that this is a passage in which Jesus teaches multiple lessons in forgiveness. His response to Simon is a master class. First of all, let’s note that Simon doesn’t voice his disdain for the woman or for Jesus. He keeps these thoughts to himself. Yet Jesus’ response reveals that he has heard Simon loud and clear.

The parable Jesus tells is easy to understand. Two people with debts—both significant, but one ten times as much as the other—graciously have their debts forgiven by their creditor. Which debtor would be more grateful? Why, of course, the one who had the greater debt. Simon is no dummy and answers correctly.

Luke then adds an interesting detail. More than any of the other Gospel writers, Luke writes like a novelist, providing details that the other authors usually do not [SLIDE]. Here in verse 44 he describes the scene with a novelist’s eye for detail. As Luke describes it, Jesus turns toward the woman but addresses Simon. This little bit of detail helps us to picture the scene. “Do you see this woman?” Jesus asks.

Simon had not seen her. He saw only her sin, whatever it may have been. But now Jesus is forcing him to look at her. The woman is probably still at Jesus’ feet. And as Simon looks down toward her, Jesus lifts her up as an example to Simon. Even
though Jesus is a guest in Simon’s home, it’s the woman who has shown love to Jesus, not Simon. Simon didn’t give Jesus water to wash his feet, but she washed his feet with her tears. Simon didn’t greet Jesus with a kiss, but she kissed his feet. Simon didn’t anoint Jesus with oil, but she anointed his feet with ointment.

This sinful woman showed more love to Jesus than Simon, the righteous Pharisee, did. This woman, who was an uninvited guest, welcomed Jesus, while Simon, his host, did not. This woman, a sinner, knew what it meant to be grateful, to be forgiven, while Simon, the expert in the law, knew nothing of forgiveness. How could he? He didn’t even think of himself as a sinner. For all his knowledge of the law, he remained ignorant about himself.

That’s what this story comes down to in the end—knowledge of self. The woman knows that she is a sinner and finds forgiveness at the feet of Jesus. She has learned that as sinful as she is, whatever she may have done, there is grace and forgiveness to be had at the feet of Jesus.

I hope that we can learn that lesson as well. Sin is serious, but let’s not take our sin too seriously. Whatever it is, whatever we’ve done, it cannot separate us from God’s love. Someone once wrote—I think it’s in the Bible—“Who will separate us from the love of Christ?” (Rom. 8:35). The answer: “I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, 39 nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 8:38-39).

But we can err on the other side as well. Like Simon, we may be blissfully unaware of our own need for forgiveness. Of course, Simon also is a sinner, but he doesn’t see himself as one. He doesn’t fall to his knees before Jesus but stands tall and proud, utterly lacking in self-awareness. He sees only too well the sinfulness of the woman, but he is completely blind to his own. He has failed to learn the first lesson of forgiveness—know that you’re a sinner.
I’ve focused on the individual level, but this passage speaks not only to individuals but to the church as well. At Simon’s house, the unrighteous and the self-righteous gathered together to encounter Jesus. If you think about it, that’s a pretty accurate description of the church. The church is also a house, a house of worship, a place where we—the unrighteous and the sometimes self-righteous—gather together to meet Jesus.

This may come as a shock to you, but this church is filled with sinners. Look around you. You’re surrounded by sinners...to your left and your right and even in your very own seat. There’s no escape! Sinners...that is who we are, but that is not all we are. If the first lesson of forgiveness is to know that you’re a sinner, the second immediately follows: forgiveness is found in Jesus Christ. As Jesus said to the woman, so he says to us: “You’re sins are forgiven...go in peace.”