“Finding Freedom through Forgiveness: Accepting God’s Forgiveness”
Luke 7:36-50

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Traditional Service

“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.’”
(Luke 7:36-50 NRSV)

What a great story! This is a picture of the human condition and of the relationships between Jesus and people and people with each other. Let’s start with the creditor—the one to whom debts are owed. That would be Jesus—God. Some people owe him a huge debt, others owe him a smaller debt, but everyone owes God a debt.

What does he do with the debt? He forgives it. Period. He forgives the big debt and he forgives the smaller debt. He forgives. That is where this story begins. Jesus walked into Simon the Pharisee’s house and he had already forgiven him, and the others at the table, and the woman, and everyone else. He forgives. That’s his nature. That is who he is. Gracious, merciful, forgiving.

That is where the story must start. With God and God’s nature as a forgiving, loving, merciful Savior.

Then the story moves to Simon the Pharisee and the woman with the alabaster jar of ointment. They are both forgiven. One knows it and is overwhelmed by the grace and love of Jesus. She is loved by God. She is forgiven. She is grateful, full of worship, overflowing with thankful amazed love.

The other is a good guy who is amazingly righteous. He doesn’t know he is forgiven and probably doesn’t acknowledge he even needs to be. He is proud.
To simplify things a bit I want to invite you to consider a continuum of people. On the one side are people who do not believe they need forgiveness. They are better than most people. They have not committed the really big sins or if they have they have made amazing progress and are quite proud of themselves, besides it was the other person’s fault to begin with. They are arrogant, self-righteous, self-justified. The word “sinner” is way over the top. Mistakes maybe from time to time but “sin” is way too big a word for their occasional lapses. The main thing here is to compare yourself to other people who are much worse and thereby always come out on top.

On the opposite end of the continuum are people filled with self-loathing and self-condemnation. They cannot be forgiven. What they have done is too grievous a wrong to be forgiven. They are unforgivable. They often think of their faults, flaws, mistakes, wrongdoing in order to heap loathing on top of loathing. If for a moment they begin to think a good thought about their worth to God they quickly follow it with all the things they think that are wrong, feel that are wrong, do that are wrong. They are miserable, depraved, worthless, and unforgivable.

I suspect that very few of us in this room would find ourselves at the far end of either side of the continuum, maybe so, or perhaps you find you lean to one side or the other. A little or a lot on the judgmental, prideful side or a little or a lot on the self-condemning shame filled side. Perhaps you find yourself like a pendulum swinging back and forth. Sometimes cruel in the way you think and talk to yourself, “stupid, idiot, worthless, never going to get it right” and other times thinking and saying to yourself that you are “better, stronger, smarter, purer, more spiritual, moral” or whatever else than almost everyone else. Self-justifying one moment. Self-condemning the next. Proud one moment. Self-loathing the next.

What is the alternative? What avoids both pitfalls on either extreme? Need and accept forgiveness. That is the woman in the story. She needed forgiveness. Her debt was large. Her sins were many. She needed forgiveness and she knew it. Jesus forgave her. She knew that too—must have heard it in his words, seen it in his eyes. He is a gracious, merciful, forgiving Savior and she said, “Thank you!”

She accepted the forgiveness Jesus gave her. We always have a choice when a gift is given to us. We can accept it and say “thank you” or reject it and say “no thanks.”

John and I had a professor in seminary who told our class the first day that he hated grades, never gave anyone an A, would we all agree to receiving a B in the class, and leave the grade thing behind and concentrate on learning. We all readily agreed except one student. He explained that he had a 4.0 and a B was not acceptable. Dr. Boers explained again that he never gave anyone an A. The student said, “I’ll earn one.” He worked so hard. He came to class exceptionally prepared, answered questions extremely well. There was no paper required in the class but he wrote one anyway. This would be the extra credit that earned him an A. Report cards came out. What do you think his grade was? “B”.

Friends, God has made extremely clear that we cannot earn forgiveness. It is a gift. A gift of his grace. Some of you are killing yourself in the attempt to be righteous enough, good enough, doing all kinds of extra credit. You will be the one God says has earned an A. You won’t. No one will.

“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— not the result of works, so that no one may boast.”
(Ephesians 2:8-9 NRSV)

It is a gift! You accept a gift or you reject it. This is not one you can earn or pay for. It is of a value you could never afford to pay. You cannot reciprocate with a gift of equal value or size.
On the Cross Jesus took into himself the sins of the whole world. Yours, mine, the woman with the alabaster jar, Simon the Pharisee, everyone. The debts of us all forgiven. Every debt of every one. Grace, mercy, forgiveness.

Here in this place under the Cross we say we are sinners saved by grace. We need forgiveness because we are disobedient to God, we say and do and think and feel things that are hurtful, wrong, destructive. Anger. Greed. Lust. Pride. Envy. Sloth. Gluttony. Sins of the flesh, sins of the heart, sins of all kinds. A debt to a pure and holy and righteous loving God. Sinners saved by grace.

Grace. Amazing, wonderful, redeeming, loving grace! Grace that says, “Your sins are forgiven.” Grace that says, “I love you.” Grace that says, “You are my beloved child.” You, me, the woman with the alabaster jar, Simon the Pharisee, all of us, loved by a gracious, forgiving, fabulous God!

She washed his feet with her tears. She rubbed his feet with ointment. She kissed them. She dried them with her hair. She received the gift of grace and worshipped him, loved him, thanked him.

The last word in this story? “And he said to the woman, ‘Your faith has saved you; go in peace.’

I want so much for every single one of you to be able to go in peace this morning. To have the peace in your heart, mind, soul, self, that comes from knowing you are a sinner saved by grace through faith in the One who forgives.

I don’t want you to leave here today with the lack of peace that comes from arrogance and pride and judgmentalism and attempted self-righteousness. Let it go. You cannot earn the love of God.

I don’t want you to leave this place today with the lack of peace that comes from guilt and shame and self-condemnation. No amount of beating yourself up will be enough. Let it go. Accept your forgiveness. It is the gift of God.

How can you make it clear that you want to stand under the Cross as one who needs and accepts forgiveness? Take the bread when it comes to you—the symbol of his body broken for you. Take the cup when it comes to you—the symbol of his blood poured out for the forgiveness of the whole world. You. Me. The woman with the alabaster jar and Simon the Pharisee.

When we have the bread, after we share in the ritual of consecration, I am going to ask you two questions that invite a response. Do you need forgiveness? Do you accept his forgiveness?