

A Wash of Tears
By Jason Huff
Colossians 1:9-14, Psalm 32, Luke 7:36-50

Today's third Scripture reading comes from the Gospel of Luke, 7:36-50. Listen now to the Word of God as Luke writes. "Now one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him, so he went to the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table. When a woman who had lived a sinful life in that town learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's house, she brought an alabaster jar of perfume, and as she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them. When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is-- that she is a sinner." Jesus answered him, "Simon, I have something to tell you." "Tell me, teacher," he said. "Two men owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he canceled the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?" Simon replied, "I suppose the one who had the bigger debt canceled." "You have judged correctly," Jesus said. Then he turned toward the woman and said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet. Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven-- for she loved much. But he who has been forgiven little loves little." Then Jesus said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." The other guests began to say among themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?" Jesus said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace.""

Perspective changes everything. A television show that makes no sense to me whatsoever is brilliant to those who've been watching it from the beginning. A hockey team's loss after a twenty-game winning streak isn't so bad, put into perspective. Perspective often gives meaning to our lives and to the events we see around us. For example, last Saturday about a dozen of us went downtown to see the Detroit Tigers. It was part of a program called Home Plate. Now what Home Plate does is, they give various athletes from the Detroit area the opportunity a few hours before the game to share their Christian faith with about 5,000 people. Adam Everett, the current shortstop for the Tigers, was one of the players that talked about his beliefs. That in and of itself was pretty great...but when Everett hit a grand slam home run in the bottom of the 4th inning, it took on a much bigger meaning for those of us who had heard his testimony. It added layers of perspective...while a grand slam is great, before Home Plate, I had no idea who Adam Everett was. When he hit that ball out of the park afterwards, though, I was glad to know a little bit about who he is. Today's Scripture lesson teaches us a lot about perspective. It has a lot to say about forgiveness, too, and how the two concepts are related, and how our perspective of forgiveness says a lot about who we are and what we believe and how we treat others. And it may help us understand this special day we celebrate today a little better too.

Today's story starts with Jesus being invited to the home of a Pharisee. This is kind of surprising, since many of the Pharisees didn't trust Jesus. They thought He was too willing to hang around people who weren't of the right social class, people who sinned and hadn't committed themselves to the Pharisees' rigid view of Jewish law. But as we can see, just like being part of the Republican Party or the Democratic Party doesn't define everything about you, this Pharisee wasn't completely defined by the religious party that he was a part of. Simon was curious about Jesus and invited Jesus even though some of his religious friends would have questioned him about it. What's more, because the story tells us that they were reclining at the table, this was more than just asking somebody over for dinner. Reclining at table was something done at banquets and feasts. Jesus would have been Simon's guest of honor. The special guests would have laid on pillows around the table, but others could come and listen to the conversation. In fact, as part of festive custom, the doorway to Simon's home would have been left open so others would be welcomed. And that's exactly how a certain unnamed woman is able to come in to the dinner party.

Simon is shocked that this woman has come in and interrupted his dinner party, and that's because of his perspective. The Greek simply says that she was a sinner, nothing more, nothing less. But the people in the city knew her sins, and that totally destroyed their opinion of her. She couldn't redeem herself in their eyes. And everything she does speaks to their view of her as sexually immoral. For one, she had a jar of expensive perfume, which was a luxury most couldn't afford – perhaps that speaks to the sins she committed. But what's worse, she shows no proper sense of shame in their eyes. She weeps on Jesus' feet and kisses them. To a Jew of Jesus' time, the feet were among the parts of the body that were considered unclean and private. A Jewish servant couldn't be asked to wash his master's feet – it was considered beneath them. So she's already debased herself in a public setting. But even worse, she takes down her hair to dry Jesus' feet. This was another broken taboo, because only a woman's husband had the privilege of seeing his wife with her hair down. For this woman to take her hair down in front of other men says to Simon and all his other guests that this woman is a harlot. They're deeply shocked by her actions. When Simon thinks to himself that Jesus isn't a prophet because He doesn't know who she is, he's not expecting Jesus to be a mind reader. He isn't expecting that Jesus has some superhuman knowledge. Simon believes that by her actions alone, it should be obvious to everyone in the room that this woman is indecent and immoral and should be sent away. When Jesus says nothing, Simon doubts just how holy his guest could possibly be.

But Jesus has a different perspective on everything that happens. He does seem to have special knowledge about this woman. He also knows Simon's thoughts! And so Jesus tells Simon a story about two men, one who owes a banker almost two year's wages, and another who owes him a little over two month's wages. And this isn't a Visa or Mastercard bill we're talking about where you spend some money in January that you can pay back out of the extra money you have in March and April and June. The average person would have no way of earning more than the standard daily wage, and that's what Jesus says – they have no way to pay the lender back.

Now the man who has lent them both this money decides to forgive both debts completely. Now this says a lot about the lender – I mean, if I went down to Huntington Bank and told them I couldn't make the payments on my mortgage, they might give me an extra month or two, they might work out a payment plan, but the last thing they would ever say is, "Just forget about it." But that's what this lender does. He does something overwhelmingly generous. He isn't required to do it – he just does. So then, Jesus asks, which one will love the lender more? The one who was forgiven a massive debt, or one who was forgiven a smaller debt? Simon guesses it will be the one who has been forgiven the most, and he's right.

Then Jesus does something that calls out Simon a little bit. Simon hasn't been a great host. Yes, he took a risk and invited Jesus to his home for dinner, making him the guest of honor at a banquet. He might get some flak for it from his friends. But he's still concerned about other people's perspective. He isn't truly welcoming of Jesus, not like he would be for someone that he trusted completely. Jesus mentions a few things that Simon, as master of the feast, could have done. Providing water for a guest to wash their feet was common. A kiss of peace as one entered the house assured a guest of good treatment. And oil for the head would make a guest comfortable in the arid heat. None of the actions Jesus mentions were required by etiquette, but it was important to show a guest of honor hospitality. Simon showed little respect to Jesus.

But Jesus' perspective on the woman at His feet was completely different from Simon's. He knew that this woman had come to show her gratitude to Him. She knew her sins and she was taking responsibility for them. She was turning to the only person she knew had true authority and the power to forgive sins. She showed Jesus true hospitality. She washed his feet; she kissed him; she anointed him with oil. She didn't mean to offend anyone; the truth is, she wasn't focused on anyone else but Jesus. She showed Him her thankfulness and devotion the only way she knew how. And Jesus knew this. Jesus accepted her show of faith, as culturally inappropriate as it might have been, because He knew her heart. Jesus had the right perspective. She has come to Christ's feet having heard His message, having repented of her sin, and realizing God's forgiveness. That is the reason she loves much. Some translations of today's text don't quite have it right – they imply that she is forgiven because she loves. But the truth is, she has already been forgiven, and the mark of that forgiveness is her love. To the crowd's surprise, Jesus tells her that her sins are forgiven. He knows the truth, that God has set her free through the gift of faith.

What's funny is that the story doesn't end. We are left without a conclusion. We don't know if Simon realizes that he needs forgiveness just like the woman he and the other condemned. We don't know if there were other conversations or if Jesus got run out of town. It's one of those stories that creates more questions than it answers. And when I was working on this passage this week, a number of things stood out to me. They are things we ought to consider as we think about this lesson this week.

First, I wondered just how many of us relate to the man who was forgiven the small debt. Sometimes, I think this is the hardest place to be with God, especially as modern Americans. We have been taught to stand on our own two feet, to take care of ourselves. When we need help, we often feel ashamed rather than grateful. We feel that we've failed when we can't measure up to our own standards, and nothing's worse than failing with the finish line right in front of us.

In the story, I don't wonder if the person forgiven two months wages feels not thankfulness but resentment. Resentment because maybe he could have done it all himself if he'd only worked harder or done more. The resentment even might be at the lender – we often would rather owe a real debt to someone than feel like we have a debt of gratitude to someone. And this is so true on a spiritual level too. Many of us here today have been in church a long time. We don't feel the weight of sin bearing down on us. We did our best to follow the rules. Sometimes we wonder, “Why did God have to go through all that trouble for what I did?”

But when we have God's perspective, that viewpoint changes. In God's eyes, all have sinned and fallen short of His glory. No one deserves His mercy. Even the smallest sin separates us from a relationship with God. And perhaps the most difficult challenge is that the pride that comes from living a quote-unquote “good” life is one of the most dangerous sins of all! We desperately need God's vantage point, because from it, we can see that none of us is all that different from the sinful woman Jesus met in today's story. The sins we have will condemn us if left undealt with. But also like the sinful woman, we can know God's grace and forgiveness. It is promised to us when we repent and put our living faith in God's son, Jesus Christ. And that forgiveness can remove the resentment that we might feel because we know that we can't bridge the gap between us and God – but we don't have to, because that bridge has already been built by Christ's cross.

The second thing that struck me this week was the issue where I got the title of the sermon from – the woman's tears. I wanted to know why she was crying and what it meant. At least from my experience and what I know, this is a key for us as the readers to understanding this woman's heart. Because most of us know that crying is a genuine experience...it's easy to tell when someone's faking it. In fact, did you know that it is so difficult to get most actors and actresses in movies to cry that some tears you see on screen are computer generated? It's just hard to do. All of us have sometimes felt false sorrow, where we felt badly for something that wasn't our fault, or we've felt sad because we've been caught doing something. Some people are more emotional than others. But most of us don't cry unless something strikes us deeply.

And so I wanted to understand this woman's tears. Why is she crying? Is she sad? At first, I thought perhaps that was the case. Maybe her sorrow over her sins has left her crying in regret and hoping for redemption. I think it could be part of it. But at the same time, it could be from joy...joy in realizing that this man who is so much more than a man, this Jesus, could forgive her and make her right with God. It's another possibility. But her tears also speaks to her genuine love. She is not just playing at having faith. It's real to her, real enough that she can't control the emotion that's pouring out of her. This also got me to thinking...when was the last time that your emotions were a part of what you turned over to God? We in the Presbyterian church tend to be very intellectual. We educate our pastors well, we study, we do the committee thing...but our emotions are often left out. I had to think...when was the last time I was moved to tears about something that moves the heart of God? When did I last feel joy when someone I'd been praying for came to know Jesus as Savior and Lord? When did I last cry over the lost who don't know Him? It struck me that this woman is actually an example to us, an example that when we belong to Jesus, our hearts belong to Him too. This goes for both women and men. In front of God, it's a safe place even for those of us who need to appear strong for others. Alone in prayer, even the strongest one of us can admit we are weak; God will be strong for us.

This leads me to my final thought on this passage for this day, and it has to do with Mother's Day. Our perspectives on our moms change over time, don't they? When we're little, our mothers are everything. They feed us, they take care of us, we're deeply connected to them. As children, there's nothing like knowing that you can come home to Mom. As we get older, sometimes things change. Our perspectives are from a different angle. Mom isn't perfect any more. We actually have to work at having a relationship with our mothers, and sometimes, especially in those teen years, those relationships break down. They often get fixed as we grow older, but we never quite have that same perspective we did when Mom was the center of everything. Maybe in the midst of celebrating today, there is healing that needs to happen. Forgiveness needs to be given and received. For those of us whose moms are no longer with us, we can still extend that forgiveness...and receive it from God, who is the ultimate forgiver of all sins. With Christ, we have a new perspective...the old can be washed away. Our story today reminds us that we're all in need of forgiveness, and we can all learn to love much, for we have been forgiven much.

So as we leave today, we should have some questions on our hearts for the week ahead. Whom have I misjudged because of an incomplete perspective? Who do I need to forgive, and be forgiven by? How can I show the forgiveness I have received from God to others? How can I show that I have given my whole self to God – my logic, my emotions, my feelings, my thoughts? And how will I stay in touch with God day by day so that I have His perspective on the world around me? May God bless us as we ask these questions this week and live in the joy of his forgiveness each and every day. Let's pray.