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Pentecost 3

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Filled with Forgiveness and Love”

Text: Luke 7:36-8:3

(also 2 Samuel 11:26-12:10, 13-14; Galatians 2:15-21; 3:10-14)

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

The evening had been carefully planned. Jesus had been invited over. An investigation would take place. Was He a prophet, or wasn't He? Simon had not invited Him as an equal, and, in fact, he would insult Jesus from the start as part of his plan. Provoke Him a bit. See how He would react. None of the common courtesies for guests would be extended to Him. He would be ignored. No kiss, no water and oil for washing His hands and feet. It would be clear what was going on here - both to Jesus *and* to all the guests. Simon was in control. Simon would run things here. Simon would ask the questions.

And things were going as planned . . . until *that woman* showed up. She was not part of Simon plan. How could she be? She was a sinner. Everyone knew it. Yet if it takes a sinner to know a sinner, then she saw a sinner in Simon. For how could he invite Jesus over and then treat Him like that? She knew what it felt like to be shamed. She knew what it felt like to be insulted and not welcomed. And so she would take matters into her own hands. She would see to it that Jesus received the honor due Him.

For she had come to know who Jesus was. Jesus had been proclaiming His message that God loves sinners. This was quite different than the message she had been hearing from the Pharisees: that God cared for the righteous who kept the Law. But Jesus was different. Jesus was not a prophet who avoided sinners, but who searched them out, and cared for them, and even ate with them. She heard from Jesus that God not only loved sinners, but that His grace and forgiveness was available for them - *for her!* - even though she could not make compensation for her sins. And she believed. The Word of God from the mouth of Jesus had worked faith in her heart. Yes, she was forgiven! Thanks be to God!

But why did she not go to the Temple to give thanks to God? Would that not have been the proper place? And there was a Court of the Women for just such a thing. There she could get as close to the Holy of Holies as was allowed. . . . But she didn't, because she not only believed the *message* of Jesus, she believed *in* Jesus.

That here is where she could give thanks to God. That here - in this man and no longer in the Temple - was the glory of God. And so to Him she would come. To Him she would give thanks and praise.

And so she brought her ointment, her perfume, and was probably going to anoint His hands and head. She wasn't planning on washing His feet - she assumed that would have already been done. Everybody did that; always! You didn't anoint what was unwashed. But when Jesus came into the house, He was offered no water. And then when He immediately took His place reclining at the table, His head and hands were no longer available to her. Her heart was so full of love, but what could she do now?

And then the tears started streaming down her face. Tears of two kinds: tears of joy over her forgiveness and the presence of her Jesus, *and* tears of sadness at the shame and insults hurled at Him by Simon. And then she knows. She knows what she will do. She will do what should have already been done: she will wash His feet, using her tears as water. And instead of using her clothes as a towel to dry them, she lets down her hair - which was no small thing! That was something done usually by a bride on her wedding night. But she felt like a bride. Yes, loved like a bride. And so she would act as one. Returning His love with hers.

Simon must have been furious! And yet, in a way, this played into his hands. For what would Jesus do? What would He say? ***If He were a prophet, He would know who this woman was who was touching Him, that she was a sinner.*** Yes, yes . . . this would turn out to be a good test after all . . .

But Jesus turns the tables on him. Not only does He not rebuke this woman for what she was doing, He addresses Simon as if *he* were the sinner! Simon, the Pharisee. Simon, the respectable one. Simon, keeper of the Law. ***Simon, I have something to say to you,*** Jesus said. A phrase which meant: *you're not going to like what I have to say.* But Simon, ever self-righteous, and perhaps with a bit of a smug smile on his face, responds, ***"Say it, teacher."*** Bring it on, Jesus.

So Jesus - loving Simon too - tells him a parable. To help him understand. A money lender had two debtors - one who owed little, and one who owed lots. Neither could pay, so he forgave both. Which will love him more? . . . Well, not much of a test, Simon must have thought to himself. And so still smugly smiling, and perhaps looking at his guests with a bit of amusement, he responds with the obvious answer: ***"The one, I suppose, for whom he cancelled the larger debt."*** And just as Nathan the prophet sprung his trap on King David and caught him in his own words, so, too, has Jesus now caught Simon.

For you see, Simon, you are a sinner, too. And if Jesus should avoid sinners, then

He would have to avoid you, too. But Jesus has forgiven this woman, and Jesus has forgiven Simon as well. The debts of *both* in the parable are cancelled. Not because of who they are, but because of who Jesus is: the God of love come in human flesh.

But while they are the same, there is a difference, isn't there? The woman rejoices in the gift, while Simon rejects it. This kind of forgiveness - *with no merit or worthiness in him* - is not the kind of forgiveness Simon wants. But it is the only forgiveness there is. It is as Paul told us today - it is all grace, all gift. There is nothing we can do for it; no Law we can fulfill, no work we can do. Either Christ does it for us, or it is not done at all.

For Simon, look at yourself! Look at what you have done, your plotting and scheming today. And look at what you have left undone - giving Jesus nothing but shame and insult. What kind of heart do your actions betray? Compare that to the love of this woman which has flowed from a heart that has been filled with the love and forgiveness and life of Christ. Simon, what shall I say to all this?

And with each word from Jesus' lips - *you did this, but she did that* - Simon's blood pressure goes up a few more points. But with each word, the love of this woman also swells up in her! For Jesus has not only forgiven her, now He is defending her, and confirming her, and embracing her! . . . And she knew what this meant, even as Jesus did. This love He is showing her is a costly love. For Simon and his friends would not take this sitting down! They would be back, but next time, with an even bigger stick of shame and insult. But this too, Jesus was willing to endure for her - and *for you*. The biggest stick of shame and insult: **the cross**.

Finally, then, Jesus speaks to the woman. *All* that He has said so far has also been for her and it has filled her heart with joy and peace. But He speaks directly also those words that we can never hear enough: **Your sins are forgiven**. Yes, your faith is right. Yes, I am God in the flesh. Yes, you are free. **Go in peace**.

And though we are not told, I'm sure she did. For she was no longer a sinner on death row, held captive to sin and death, with no hope and no future, but a sinner whose debts have been cancelled and who has been set free to live. *To live before God in righteousness and purity forever!* To love as she has been loved. For how could she not? How could she not walk out of that stinkin' prison house of darkness and death and into the light and air of the Son of God, and not be filled with joy and peace? . . . And perhaps she was one of the women who kept following Jesus and providing for Him.

But Simon knew no such joy. Would he? Jesus wanted it for him. For Jesus had come for him as He had sent Nathan to David, as He would come to St. Paul, and as He comes for you. For His love and His cross are for all. He bore the sins of all,

paid the debt of all, atoned for the sins of all, and now proclaims this forgiveness to all. **And especially to you.** That you hear and believe. That you be washed in the water of His grace and live. That He take you out of the prison house of sin and death and into the light of His love, and set you free.

And He has! That's why - like that sinful woman - you are here. Not that by your presence you are earning anything, but rejoicing in His gift, you are here as a bride, bursting with love. For you are no stranger or intruder here, for here you are in your Lord's house, and *you* are the invited and honored guest. And for you, your Lord and Saviour has omitted no courtesy. Here you are kissed with His forgiveness. Here you are washed in the water of His baptism. Here you are filled with His Word and anointed with His Spirit. And here you are fed with the food of everlasting life. And in all these ways, your Bridegroom embraces you. He is not ashamed of you, but defends you and speaks well of you and welcomes you.

What sin and shame have you brought with you today? What has the world thrown in your face, the devil whispered in your ear, and your own sinful flesh tormented you with? Whatever it is, hear again the words of your Saviour. Your Saviour who does not avoid sinners like you and me, but is here for you, searches for you, and loves you. And who says to you: *yes, your faith is right. Yes, I am God in the flesh. Yes, I died and rose again for you. Yes, your sins are forgiven. Yes, I have made you My bride! Yes, I am yours and you are mine. God, you are free. Depart in peace.*

In the Name of the Father and of the (+) Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

[Cultural background for this sermon and story from *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels* by Kenneth Bailey (IVP, 2008). An excellent resource.]