

“Forgiven Much”

“A certain moneylender had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he cancelled the debt of both. Now which of them will love him more?” (Luke 7:41-42).

A few years ago I worked at a youth basketball camp where I and two other coaches were put in charge of the youngest group of campers. Each day for two weeks, 30 boys between the ages of seven and ten showed up in the lower gym at Concordia High School where we tried to teach them the fundamentals of the game. It’s a hard age to coach. Some of the boys were really into it and understood exactly what we were trying to show them...others barely knew the difference between a basketball and soccer ball and keeping their attention took heroic measures.

This was coaching at its most basic level and yet, as raw and unskilled as these kids were, they were fiercely competitive. *Everything we did* – whether it was a shooting drill or a scrimmage or even a wind sprint – *everything* became a contest first to win and then to hold over the other boys in the group forming an unspoken but clearly defined pecking order that separated the good players from bad players. Even when we would put the scoreboard away and tell the kids we were going to play without keeping track of who was winning, the kids immediately became the scorekeepers. It was almost instinctual and several times we actually had to stop the action to settle arguments that had started because one eight year-old began fighting with another about who was “winning” the scrimmage. No matter what we would threaten or do as coaches, we couldn’t stop them from keeping score.

In today’s Gospel reading from Luke, we are introduced to the ultimate group of scorekeepers. The Pharisees made their living watching and judging the actions of others. These Jewish leaders guarded the Law of Moses, added their own rules, then highlighted and scrutinized even the most microscopic transgressions of their impossible moral code. A note in the “Lutheran Study Bible” tells us that the original name of this powerful sect was actually a Hebrew phrase meaning “the separate ones” and these Pharisees did everything in their scorekeeping power to make sure that they stayed at the top of the moral pecking order in Israel.

Throughout the Gospels, we find these men monitoring the movements of Jesus; critiquing His Words; measuring His actions; scolding His acceptance of sinners (Luke 5:30) and yet, Jesus was a rabbi who was highly regarded by the people. The rumors of His miraculous signs most certainly accompanied Jesus wherever He went and He was a threat to this band of scorekeepers that did everything they could to show that they were “not like other men” (Luke 18:11).

It’s in this climate of arrogance and suspicion that a Pharisee named Simon invited Jesus to eat with him and, as our text unfolds, we actually learn about the motives for this meeting from the things omitted from Luke’s account. Remember, the Pharisees were all about appearance. Every detail of their lives was measured out for decorum according to their laws and they didn’t forget *anything* when it came to social or religious customs. And yet, in this case, the most basic etiquette is ignored.

As Jesus points out to them later in the reading, when He entered Simon’s house there was no official greeting. His dirty feet remained unwashed and no oil was offered for His head. Kenneth Bailey, who is scholar on Middle Eastern custom and culture, comments on this absence of hospitality pointing out that, “As Jesus entered the house, all the traditional courtesies were omitted. Custom required a kiss of greeting, usually on the face. (Then) After the guests were seated on stools around the...dining couch...water and olive oil would be brought out for the washing of hands and feet. (And) *Only then* could grace be offered...” for the meal.¹

These Pharisees had neglected their very own laws for welcoming guests and the reason was clear: Jesus had been asked there to be discredited and disgraced. This was no oversight! This was no mistake! The omission of basic hospitality in the presence of these Pharisees was a calculated and pointed insult...*and this is what makes the next part of the text so extraordinary.*

In verse 37, Luke tells us that a woman of the city – who was a known “sinner” – had learned about this bizarre invitation to Simon’s house. She somehow made her way into the dining room and before anyone could send her away for her

¹ Kenneth Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP), p. 243.

obvious intrusion, she began to offer the very hospitality of which Jesus had been deprived. And, make no mistake, this bold act of devotion would have been a scandal! Not only was this a woman of ill-repute in the community, but her incursion into this high-profile meal was a complete disregard of social order. Then, to make things worse, she actually unfurls her hair and uses it dry the tears from Jesus' feet. To grasp the offense of this action, you have to understand the cultural connotations of such a gesture. Middle Eastern women did not – and, even to this day – do not let their hair down in public. This was a sign of intimacy reserved for marriage – in fact, rabbinic law actually stated that a married woman going about with unbound hair was a sin that justified divorce.

This was a big deal and must have been an utter outrage to the host and his scorekeeping friends and yet, no move was made to throw her out. From Simon's perspective, this lack of respect for the Law and the failure of Jesus to publicly condemn this woman removed any doubt that Jesus was a lawbreaker and a fraud. Luke writes that when Simon saw this he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner" (Luke 7:39).

And in response to this unspoken word of disgust and condemnation, Jesus told a three-sentence parable that changed everything: "A certain moneylender had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he cancelled the debt of both." And then Jesus turned to the head scorekeeper with one question: "Which one of them will love him more?" *This...is...beautiful!!!* In these simple words, Jesus had completely turned the tables on Simon. This question confronted the Pharisee with simple math. It put his scorekeeping skills right into the spotlight and forced him to give the only answer he could and with a reluctant start, Simon responded, "The one, I suppose, for whom he cancelled the larger debt."

And with Simon's answer still in the air, Jesus attacked: "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss 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 are many, are forgiven – for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little." In these words, Jesus condemned Simon's lack of decorum, He unmasked Simon's deceitful motives and He convicted Simon and his scorekeeping friends of their rejection of grace...and my friends, Jesus' assault on Simon the Pharisee is an assault on the scorekeeper that lives inside each one of us!

Like the kids in the basketball camp, we are all natural-born scorekeepers. Sometimes, like the Pharisees, our work of judging sin is easy and even expected. Other times, we have to be much more subtle in the way we separate ourselves. Either way, we are always looking for reasons to divide and we spend our energy counting up the sins of others, all the while justifying our own horrific and damnable sins. And to our natural, scorekeeping selves, Jesus is a deplorable scandal! He is an intolerable offense! He is the enemy of the "good" person that we think we are! As long as our inner scorekeeper lives, we are against Christ and today, I'm here to tell you, that is why Jesus came! He came to confront the sinners we are to put our best selves to death. He came to show us that we have nothing to offer before a holy, just and righteous God and on the Cross and in the waters of our Baptism He came to put us to death that we might live in Him.

The scorekeeper demands from sinners a pound of flesh...but Christ came to give His flesh and shed His blood for the sake of the sinners. The scorekeeper demands punishment for even the smallest transgression of the Law...but Jesus came to keep the Law for us and take the punishment for our most unspeakable sins. In the story of David from our Old Testament lesson we see the horrific sin of which we are all capable...and in the Cross of Jesus we see the horrific sin of which we have all been forgiven and by His death and resurrection we have eternal life!

Jesus taught about the love of God for sinners. That's what drew the woman to Him on that day. From His voice, she had heard God's grace and she had been touched by His word of mercy! The score had been settled, her life had been changed by the Gospel of Christ and now she had come to share the untamed love that overflows from a new and clean heart.

The beautiful and scandalous irony of today's parable is that in His words – whether the Pharisee realized it or not – Jesus indicates that He had also forgiven Simon and my friends, Jesus has also forgiven you. No matter what sins you have committed...no matter what sins you have tried to hide; the sin that you've struggled to justify, the sin that has destroyed your relationships and separated you from God...that sin *and your scorekeeping hearts* have been crucified with Christ and today – in Christ – you stand before God as one who has been forgiven much. Go now in peace...and love much. Amen.

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