

“You Are Forgiven”

“Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven—for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little.” And he said to her, “Your sins are forgiven.” (Luke 7:47-48).

We are, by nature, addicted to keeping score. At work, we count up the hours we bill or the sales we make. In school, we monitor our GPA and measure our class rank. At home we read labels and count calories, we buy Fit Bits and add up our steps, and we even keep score in our relationships, building up invisible “points” so that we can cash them in when we want something from our parent or spouse. The truth is, in every aspect of life, we keep score. That’s the way of the world, and yet, when we try to apply a scorekeeping mentality to our relationship with God, the results are destructive, if not damning, and, in the end, we only find ourselves farther from God and from each other.

In today’s Gospel reading from Luke, we are introduced a group of Jewish leaders called the Pharisees, and these men were the ultimate scorekeepers. They dedicated their lives to watching and judging the actions of others. They 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 the 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 keeping the rules. Every detail of their lives was measured out and they didn’t forget *anything* when it came to social or religious customs. And yet, at this dinner party, 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. In his book, “Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes” scholar Kenneth Bailey comments on this absence of hospitality by 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...*Only then* could grace be offered” for the meal (Bailey, 243).

These Pharisees had neglected their very own laws for welcoming guests and this was no mistake. The reason was clear: Jesus had been asked there to be discredited and disgraced. 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, 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. Even to this day, Middle Eastern women 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. You see, 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."

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 host and head scorekeeper with one question: "Which one of them will love him more?" 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 went on the attack: "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 fellow scorekeepers 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!

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 transgressions 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! In fact, He is the enemy of the "good" person that we think we are! As long as our inner scorekeeper lives, we stand against Christ and today, I'm here to tell you, that this is why Jesus came! He came to confront the sinner you are and to put your best self 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 a pound of flesh from sinners...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!

The beautiful and scandalous irony of today's parable is that, in His words, 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 whose many sins have been forgiven. And now, you can go in peace and you can love much. Amen.

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