

Luke 7:36-50
4th Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon Series: Stretch Marks
When I Need Forgiveness

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³⁶ When one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him, he went to the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table. ³⁷ A woman in that town who lived a sinful life learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's house, so she came there with an alabaster jar of perfume. ³⁸ 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.

³⁹ 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."

⁴⁰ Jesus answered him, "Simon, I have something to tell you."

"Tell me, teacher," he said.

⁴¹ "Two people owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. ⁴² Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he forgave the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?"

⁴³ Simon replied, "I suppose the one who had the bigger debt forgiven."

"You have judged correctly," Jesus said.

⁴⁴ 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. ⁴⁵ You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. ⁴⁶ You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet. ⁴⁷ Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—as her great love has shown. But whoever has been forgiven little loves little."

⁴⁸ Then Jesus said to her, "Your sins are forgiven."

⁴⁹ The other guests began to say among themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?"

⁵⁰ Jesus said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

Grace and peace to you from our risen Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

The past few weeks we've been looking at some of the hard questions that we as Christians must answer—the kind of questions that stretch our faith—the kind of questions which, once we have wrestled through them leave marks on us, in our lives, in our faith. Three weeks ago it was, *How can I say that my God, the Triune God of the Bible, is the one and only true God?* The next week, we contemplated *How can evil exist in a world ruled by an all-powerful and all-loving God?* Last Sunday, *What am I to do when I am faced with death (whether it's the prospect of my own death or the death of someone I love)?* Finally today, I want to take a little more introspective look. God, Good and Evil, Death and Eternal Life—these are all very big, spiritual things that seem at times to be "out there," but today let's look in here (into our hearts). Today, I had planned on setting before us the question, *What do I do when I feel guilt?* that's the theme you have printed in your worship folders. But the more I pondered our sermon text for this morning the more I felt that wasn't really the best question represented

by the lesson. Instead, let's ponder this morning the question, *What should or can I do when I need forgiveness?*

Now, if I asked you what the difference was between the questions *What should I do when I feel guilt?* and *What should I do when I need forgiveness?* what would you say? The answer might not be all that apparent, both questions seem to be asking more or less the same thing. When we experience guilt is precisely when we need forgiveness. But it isn't the only time we need forgiveness. Sometimes we need to be forgiven even when we don't feel guilty.

Our Gospel lesson this morning introduced us to two characters who needed to be forgiven—normal people, just like any of us here. The first one is a man named Simon. Other than his name, Luke doesn't tell much about Simon beside the fact that he had invited Jesus over for dinner that day. That and the fact that he was a Pharisee. While we may not know that much about Simon, we do know a fair amount about the Pharisees. They were highly devoted to the teaching of the rabbis and the law of Moses. They were very concerned not only about being pious, but making sure everyone else knew just how morally upright they were. Finally, they were quick to look down on anyone they deemed less righteous than themselves: foreigners, tax collectors, shepherds, tanners, those they deemed to be unclean and those they deemed as "sinners." In short, anyone and everyone who was not a Pharisee! We aren't told what exactly it was that Simon was looking for when He invited Jesus to join him for dinner that evening, but as we hear the events that unfolded what becomes clear is that Simon had a much greater need for Jesus to be there than he had ever imagined.

It came to pass that a woman in that town heard that Jesus would be eating with Simon that evening. Now, this woman, we get even less of an introduction to than Simon, not even her name, just that she was **a woman who had lived a sinful life in that town.** We don't know the details of her life of sin nor is it our place to speculate. Suffice it to say, it was something open, something the whole town was aware of. The result would have been that in the eyes of her neighbors she was an "unclean" woman.

She was a "sinner" in the eyes of her townsfolk, but more importantly, she was a sinner in the eyes of God—spiritually dead in her sins and heading toward eternal damnation in hell, that is, until she met Jesus. Somehow, somewhere along the way, she had either heard Jesus or heard of Him and His teachings. As she listened the words He had to say, she was cut to the heart, convicted, convinced that her life and actions were in opposition to God and His will. She had looked into the mirror of God's law and seen the dreadful reflection of her sin. But she had also heard the message of the gospel. She knew that Jesus brought the forgiveness of sins, yes, even to someone as sinful as she. Through Him, she was no longer dead in sin, but alive as she had never been before. So when she heard that Jesus was eating at Simon's house that day, there was nothing, not even self-righteous Simon, that could stop her from going to Him.

Weeping, no longer over the guilt of her sins, but now in joy over the forgiveness she had graciously been given, she came to Jesus as He was reclining at Simon's table and **stood behind Him at His feet.** The tears pouring from her face fell down and spotted those very feet which one day would be pierced through with nails as He was crucified for her sins. **Then she wiped His feet with her hair, kissed them, and** taking out and opening the jar of perfume she had brought for this precise purpose **poured it out on them.**

As the fragrance of the perfume filled the room around them what would Jesus have been thinking? “Here is My daughter, My sister, who once was lost but now is found, who was dead, but now is alive. This is why I have come into this world, to seek and to save the lost. How beautiful is this thank offering with which she has blessed me today.”

Simon, on the other hand, was less charitable in his thinking, **If this man were a prophet**, he said to himself, **He would know who is touching Him and what kind of woman she is—that she is a sinner.** If Jesus truly were a prophet, Simon reasoned, He ought to be able to discern the sins of this woman’s life.

With rather poetic irony, Jesus responded to Simon’s private thoughts revealing that He knew not only the sins of her past, but also the sins of Simon’s heart, and demonstrating that He was much more than simply a prophet of the Lord. **“I have something to tell you, Simon.”**

“Tell me, teacher,” Simon replied.

“Two people owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him \$50,000, and the other \$5,000. Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he forgave the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?”

The answer likely seemed so obvious to Simon, that he hesitated to say it out loud. “Was this some kind of a trap?” **I suppose**, he began, as if to say, “I presume the answer you want me say is,” **the one who had the bigger debt forgiven.** **“You’ve judged correctly,” Jesus said.**

Simon was right, there was a catch, and he didn’t have long to wait before the other sandal dropped. **Jesus 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—as her great love has shown. But whoever has been forgiven little loves little.**

Addressing the woman, Jesus announced to her again the news she now knew and treasured, the news she needed to hear, the news that had brought her there that day. **He said to her, “Your sins are forgiven. Your faith has saved you; go in peace.** When you feel guilt, go to Jesus, repent of your sins and then go in peace knowing with saving faith that your sins have been forgiven.

Simon, unfortunately, didn’t realize that, like the sinful woman, his life and eternity depended on Jesus. He thought he already stood right with God. He was blind to just how desperate he was for Jesus’ forgiveness and it showed in his lack of love toward Jesus. He doubted whether Jesus could even be a prophet and failed to see that He was the one who could with the power of His word forgive someone their sins.

What about you? Where do you stand in light of these two characters from our Gospel lesson? Do you realize how desperately you need Jesus’ forgiveness? Is it easier for you to be a self-righteous Pharisee lovelessly condemning those “sinners out there” while stroking your ego with all your Christian accomplishments? Or are you like the sinful woman, knowing what you’ve done or failed to do, knowing how your sins have affected the lives of loved ones and how you still face the consequences of your actions everyday?

Whether we care to admit it or not, the answer is “Yes. Yes to both of the above.” There are times when I am a self-righteous Pharisee AND there are times when I feel the crushing burden of my sins and their relentless consequences. For a Christian, life is a bit like a pendulum at times, swinging back and forth between self-righteousness and self-despair. Jesus’ words cut each one of us to the heart because none of us deserve anything from the hand of our God let alone forgiveness. At times, you’re tempted to think that you don’t really need much forgiveness, while at other times, you’re tempted to think your sins are so great even Jesus can’t forgive them.

But He does. He has every right to withhold His forgiveness, but He still comes to forgive both the “Simons” and the “sinners” of our world, including you and me, whether your self-righteousness is so bad it blinds you, or your “big sin” seems so great that it crushes you. Jesus still comes to forgive you with His own perfect life and His own perfect love. He did what you did not and did not do what you have done, and all of that for you and in your place. Jesus still comes to forgive you with His innocent death on the cross where He paid the price for every single one of your sins. He still comes to forgive you with His amazing resurrection on Easter morning. He still comes to forgive you through His Word, through Baptism, and through His Holy Supper. He still comes to forgive you freely and fully no matter how great or small your sins might seem.

How do you respond to that full and free forgiveness? We live, like this woman, in love for the Lord. But what does that look like for you and I who can’t go to Jesus and pour perfume over His feet? What it looks like is a total life transformation. We show our love to Jesus when, instead of a brick building at the end of Sulky drive, we see this as a special place where we *can* meet with God. We show our love to Jesus when instead of a booklet of paper, we see this as an opportunity to proclaim the forgiveness of Christ—to pray, to praise, and to give thanks to God. We show our love to Jesus when instead of an begrudging obligation plate, we see this as an opportunity for humble thanksgiving. We show our love to Jesus when instead of a stranger, our eyes see that person as someone whose eternal welfare is our concern. We show our love to Jesus when instead of a room full of weird, different people, we see here seated with us the brothers and sisters whom we love. We show our love to Jesus when instead of seeing God’s Word and His Sacraments not as embarrassments or a stumbling blocks, but as the vessels of that good news about Jesus—the power of salvation from sin for everyone who believes.

So what do we do, brothers and sisters, when we need forgiveness? We come to Jesus and we come to His Word. We face that mirror of the law and acknowledge the ugliness of our sins. Then we turn from that sin to Jesus and we listen to His Word—that same beautiful word that he spoke to that sinful woman the night He ate at Simon’s house is the same message He has for you—**Your sins are forgiven. Your faith has saved you. Go in peace.**

So, brothers and sisters, go in peace; live in harmony with one another; serve the Lord in gladness and in love. Amen.