

## A Sermon Preached at the Eucharist

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*Luke 7.36-8.3*

The most notable feature of Luke's version of this story is his reference to the woman as 'a sinner'; it is her character, rather than anything to do with the extravagance of her behaviour and the cost of the perfume that is the issue. But still there is a conflict played out in this story between generosity and calculation.

This woman need only have been ill, disabled, or be in contact with Gentiles to be considered a sinner by all Jews in that city. Perhaps she was employed in work that brought her into frequent contact with Gentiles, such as midwifery. Or her work may be in one of the trades that were considered to be unclean, such as dyeing cloth. Everyone in the city would know her occupation and would consider her sinful from her association with things or people regarded as unclean.<sup>1</sup>

Simon's observation is that when the woman touches Jesus she makes him unclean – and if he really were a prophet he ought to have realised this. This, we are told, is an observation that Simon says to himself. Her presence, let alone her actions, are defiling.

Only men would eat together. Women would enter the room only to serve food. A woman would always have her hair covered, and would never directly speak to or touch a man in public

Thus, when the woman in this story comes into the room where the men are eating, she is violating the standard of socially respectable behaviour for a woman - simply by being in the room. We don't know why she weeps: whether it is for joy or for sorrow; for loss or repentance, or from relief. We don't learn her story beyond the fact that 'she was a sinner'. But if this is the crucial thing about her then it explains her behaviour. In her own eyes and in Jesus' also, perhaps, it doesn't matter what she does: she has nothing left to lose. Nonetheless, even if she is silent she does not hold back her feelings in this encounter with Jesus.

Luke's gospel frequently draws attention to Jewish leaders who are interested in Jesus; people like Simon. But what is the nature of Simon's interest? Simon is in many ways probably an enthusiast for theological discussion; a spiritual dilettante for whom Jesus is mostly just interesting. This dinner invitation enables him to host and hear this charismatic young rabbi and to experience a new spiritual perspective in the wild diversity of first-century Judaism. Simon didn't need Jesus as Messiah or Saviour; he was just interested in what he had to say. This is why he fails to make Jesus welcome in the ways a guest would normally

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<sup>1</sup> The phrase *hai hamartiai autês hai pollai*, "her many sins," in v. 47 indicates that her sinfulness came from numerous acts. See Joachim Jeremias, "Despised Trades," *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969) 303-312

be welcomed, because his hospitality, such as it is, is really all about Simon and Simon's spiritual interests.

By contrast, the woman demonstrates an affinity with Jesus that is more than emotional. In this social context, Simon, the host, is in a position of power. She, by contrast, is in a position of social vulnerability and weakness. It is from precisely this position that she also demonstrates the strength of love and generosity that is characteristic of God's own self-revealing in the mystery of the cross.

The un-named, silent woman offers Jesus a hospitality that is all about Jesus. It is oriented toward him, not her. There is no theological dinner talk, only her act of utter, off-putting, self-yielding devotion. She needs Jesus not to contribute her personal spirituality but so she can become whole, the human being she was created to be.

Jesus' teaching here is that those who experience forgiveness will love much, while those who have little or no understanding of their need for forgiveness will love little. The woman is not forgiven because she shows love to Jesus – she shows the love because she knows that she is forgiven. 'And he said to the woman, 'Your faith has saved you; go in peace.'

Grace holds her captive: she hardly knows the others are there in the room with her. Her focus on Jesus is absolute. This is why the heart of this text might be said to lie in a question. The question put to Simon by Jesus: 'Do you see this woman?'

Hearing and seeing are crucial concepts for Luke. In Luke 8:10, Jesus, using the words of the prophet Isaiah, warns his disciples about looking but not seeing, and hearing but not understanding: 'He said, 'To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of God; but to others I speak\* in parables, so that "looking they may not perceive, and listening they may not understand."'. And again in 10:23-24 he reminds them of their privileged position, saying to them, "Blessed are the eyes that see what you see. For I say to you, many prophets and kings desired to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it". And when Jesus appears to the disciples in Jerusalem (Luke 24:39) Jesus directs them, "Look (*idete*) at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see (*idete*)." Seeing and believing are linked until the very end of Luke's narrative.

This morning's gospel reading ends by telling us that Jesus gets up from this encounter and goes out 'proclaiming and bringing' the good news, and he goes out accompanied not only by his disciples but by women: those he had healed and those, like the wife of King Herod's steward who had been challenged by his words: those who have seen him and believed. Luke draws attention to these women so that we also see them and become aware of those who responded to the call and the presence of Jesus.

Dorothy L. Sayers wrote:

Perhaps it is no wonder that the women were first at the Cradle and last at the Cross. They had never known a man like this Man –there never has been such another. A prophet and teacher who never nagged at them, never flattered or coaxed or patronised; who never made arch jokes about them, never treated them either as 'The women, God help us!' or 'The Ladies, God bless them!'; who rebuked without querulousness and praised without condescension; who took their questions and

arguments seriously; who never mapped out their sphere for them, never urged them to be feminine or jeered at them for being female; who had no axe to grind and no uneasy male dignity to defend; who took them as he found them and was completely unselfconscious.<sup>2</sup>

Like the woman in this morning's gospel Jesus does not hold back: he matches in the abundance of his forgiveness and the abundance of his love all the outpouring of joy and sorrow; loss, repentance, and relief that we can bring ourselves to offer.

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<sup>2</sup> Dorothy L. Sayers, 'The human-not-quite Human', in *Unpopular Opinions* (1946); cited in *Dorothy L. Sayers, Spiritual Writings* Selected and Introduced by Ann Loades(1993), p. 2