Spirituality
Pencil Preaching





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“The one to whom little is forgiven, loves little” (Luke 7:48).

If Luke’s beautifully crafted story in today’s Gospel were a short play, three characters would be on the stage; Jesus, Simon and Pharisee and the woman who intruded on the dinner to encounter Jesus. Like other stories, the interplay contrasts two characters relating to Jesus in very different ways.

Simon, a leading Pharisee, hosts a dinner for Jesus, but his lack of basic respect for his guest— no water to wash his feet, no greeting kiss, no oil to anoint his head— suggests that the dinner is a set-up to find fault with Jesus’ orthodoxy and fidelity to the Law. At issue was Jesus’ free-wheeling openness to sinners and his portrayal of God as showing extravagant mercy to people the Pharisees regarded as contaminated and outcast.

The woman is identified as a sinner in the town who learns that Jesus is dining at the house of Simon and crashes the party to reach him. She lavishes on him all of the signs of respect the Pharisee had withheld, watering his feet with her tears, drying them with her hair, pouring out precious perfume to anoint them. Such oil would have been in a small ampule whose seal could be broken only once, reserved for a passionate show of love and reverence.

The contrast is between the heart of Simon and the heart of the woman. Simon’s heart is hardened against the woman because she is a sinner. It is further hardened by his pride that he is a righteous expert in the Law. He passes judgment on both the woman and on Jesus, thinking to himself that he can hardly be a prophet or from

God if he does not realize what sort of woman is touching him. His lack of empathy has rendered him incapable of feeling his own need for mercy, and his sense of superiority cannot acknowledge that he needs to be forgiven for anything.

The woman’s heart, on the other hand, is moved to tears first by grief and then by gratitude for the healing she is experiencing in the presence of Jesus. Like the ampule, her heart has been broken open and love is pouring out. She is not only forgiven, she is being saved, liberated from sin to a new life because of her contact with Jesus.

It is a teachable moment for Simon as Jesus leads him with a little parable into admitting that those who are forgiven much will love more. The point of the story, directed at his own petrified heart, is that because he cannot admit his need for forgiveness, he will be incapable of love. Simon misses his chance at conversion and even misses the moment of forgiveness being extended to him, seizing on Jesus’ assurance to the woman that her sins have been forgiven as the theological heresy he and his Pharisee friends need to accuse Jesus of blasphemy.

The message is offered us clearly. If we want to love much, we must acknowledge how much we have been forgiven. God’s mercy is for sinners, and the more we realize that we need to be saved, the more we will experience God’s love. This, in turn, will enable us to love our fellow sinners all the more.

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