

***“Restoration”***

***“If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him—that she is a sinner.”***

There are several remarkable things about that quotation. First, Luke tells us that Simon the Pharisee said it to himself (so how did Luke know about it?) Second, Jesus picks up on the message without hearing it spoken (is that how Luke knew?). We just heard, last Sunday, after Jesus brought back to life the young man from Nain, the crowd shouted, ***“A great prophet has risen among us!”*** . . . now Simon is already questioning that view.

But let me, for the moment, zero in on Simon’s assessment of this woman: ***“she is a sinner.”*** What does he mean by that? What do you mean by that? Are you a “sinner”? We’ve been taught (or is that “programmed”?) to answer *“Yes, I am.”* What do you mean when you say that? How would you have felt this morning if I, and then our greeters, and then every person around you in the church greeted you, *“Good morning, sinner.”* If you get enough of that kind of garbage heaped on you, you get more than a little depressed.

How did Simon know ***“what kind of woman”*** this woman was? Many have suggested that she is being denigrated as a prostitute. Nothing in the text demands, requires, or even suggests that interpretation. “Sinner” in Simon’s vocabulary, carried the connotation of “lowlife” — it was a class (even close to caste) designation. As to how Simon would know, it was not, as some have suggested, that he was the greatest of all hypocrites and had availed himself of her sexual favors, and now condemns her for it.

We don’t have this quite so fixed in our society (although it is present) — gang colors, Vervace clothing, school uniforms, messages on T-shirts — these are but a few of the “markers” that help us identify rich, poor, nationality, place of origin. In Jesus’ society, it was pronounced — to the point where you could pinpoint tribe, clan, and home village.

Simon did not need to know the woman herself to know her status. So why didn't Jesus know? Nain (this is where Jesus went to Simon's home apparently; Luke gives us no notion that He had moved on elsewhere) is not that far from Nazareth (by my reckoning, about 15-20 miles). BUT, 15-20 miles in those days was a good day's journey away. If we can give a possible parallel, imagine going to a town in Northwest Ohio (let's pick Archbold); would you know the school colors? (they happen to be blue and gold). The markers in agrarian cultures of the middle east were and remain that specific.

Yet Simon's identification of this woman is not mere snobbery; the viewpoint was that, because she was not like Simon and his ilk, she was nothing — worse, her status (and his bias) told Simon that she had been rejected by God. That Jesus allowed her to touch Him was manifestation to Simon that Jesus was likewise a God-reject . . . certainly no prophet (no matter what the crowds had yelled earlier that day).

What (and how) did Jesus pick up from Simon that let Jesus know what Simon was thinking and feeling? (No, you cannot use the God-juice ploy; Philippians 2 won't let you.) I can easily imagine the look of disgust on Simon's face (and likely the faces of the others gathered in his home). [The name Mary Gordon probably doesn't register with you; she was an actress who appeared in many of the Laurel and Hardy films, usually cast as a wealthy matron, whose scowling demeanor was fixed upon those two "heros." That's the look I see on Simon's face.]

Let's examine, then, the interchange among Simon, Jesus, and this unnamed woman.

What did she do? She came into the house . . . that's a gutsy move (Robert Capon suggests this indicates an overwhelming hunger in her, a drive, that compelled her on ignoring social boundaries). She stood behind Jesus at His feet (obviously that tells us He is lying down). She wept so that her tears were enough to wash Jesus' feet (think about that; He had been out walking the dusty byways all day — that would require copious tears). She then dried His feet with her hair — now I have to

insert here that this washing and drying method is not big on efficiency; it is intensely personal (it is almost . . . almost but not quite . . . erotic). She then kisses His feet (I think with that we may have moved a little closer to erotic) and anoints them with ointment.

NOW, counter to what John recorded when Mary, the sister of Lazarus, washed Jesus' feet, this woman does not use expensive nard and Jesus does not credit her with preparing Him for burial — so let's not confuse those two narratives.

Why does she do what she does? She doesn't speak; so we get no rationale from her. Luke doesn't delve into her motives (probably because he doesn't know). Jesus doesn't address the issue directly; but we can get some clues from His comments. Our best resource to answer that question is (believe it or not) Simon the Pharisee.

In his derisive dismissal of her, he has opened our eyes to recognize why she is there — she IS a sinner; and well she knows it. Simon's problem is that he also is a sinner, but cannot admit it. Of course, we would be nothing like Simon . . . except when we are. We likewise have our tables of sinfulness . . . We will admit and confess that we have sinned (as long as no one asks for the lurid details); but we are also very ready to explain, excuse, diminish, and secrete away the seriousness of our sins. Sin is kind of the opposite of surgery: Minor surgery is what happens to someone else; major surgery is what we will undergo. "Real" sin is what we see in others; our sins tend to fall into the "socially acceptable" variety.

So we need to listen as does Simon to Jesus' parable. Here was the exchange between Jesus and Simon: "***Simon, I have something to say to you.***" "***Teacher, speak.***" So now it's our turn: "*People of St. Thomas, I have something to say to you.*" "*Pastor, speak.*" "*Wroarf!*" (I have tried to make the Greek be more sociable; it is not. Simon is a lout.)

The parable is simple: one debtor owes big bucks; another owes a small amount; both debts are cancelled. Pay close attention then to Jesus' question (questions are often more important than answers). We might

have expected this question (or one similar): “*Which one caught the biggest break? Who would be the more thankful?*” But Jesus asks what? “*Now which of them will love him more?*” “*Love him.*” Jesus seems to be caught up in that.

I want to LOL at the next words of Jesus: “***Do you see this woman?***” Simon has been fixated with laser precision on her from the moment she had the utter audacity to crash his dinner party. “*How dare she? She’s a nobody; she cannot come in here!*” Now I am inclined to hear Jesus in rather harsh terms . . . but I also need to pay attention to the text.

Jesus does not rip into Simon; Jesus does not excoriate Simon; Jesus doesn’t even yell at Simon (all the things I would have done and would still like to do . . . and aren’t you glad that Jesus is at the center and not I?) Jesus deconstructs Simon. He doesn’t tear him apart; but he dismantles Simon’s presuppositions, Simon’s values, Simon’s perceived status, and Simon’s theology.

He does this with a series of, “*You didn’t . . . she did*” All of the “You didn’t” portions addressed little more than social gaffes of the part of Simon: “***You gave me no water for my feet***” (very uncool). “***You gave me no kiss,***” (*tres gauche*). “***You did not anoint my head with oil***” (Simon, Simon, Simon, where are your manners?) These were all obligations imposed upon a good host (maybe not to be performed by him personally; but he was to see to it that it got done for his guests).

“***This woman***” was under no obligation to do anything (and now we are getting close to the Gospel) . . . and yet . . . “***. . . she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair.***” “***. . . from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet.***” “***. . . she has anointed my feet with ointment.***”

I tipped my hand a bit there (did you catch it? It was when I said “. . . and now we are getting close to the Gospel”). How do the actions of this woman get us closer to the Good News? Simon was under obligation — he had the duty — to do “host things.” Because she had no duty to do

them, Jesus affirms what she has done has come from love.

Here's the takeaway we need to carry with us: ***“But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.”*** We can, I think legitimately, affirm the obverse: “ . . . *the one to whom much is forgiven, loves a whole bunch.* ” That, then, becomes a dual-action piece of equipment for us.

First, we can use it as a kind of spiritual barometer — what is my “love quotient”? (no, not “love potion” . . . “love quotient”). How deep, vast, intense, profuse, heart-felt, life-changing, and path-reversing is my love toward God? Then we can use it to root around for the basis of that answer: Is my love intense because I know the full dimension of my sin? Is my love somewhat shallow because I don't think sin is that big a deal in my life?

Now, why would we undervalue the sin in our lives? In large measure because we really don't trust the words of Jesus, first about this woman: ***“I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven . . .”*** and then to her: ***“Your sins are forgiven . . . Your faith has saved you; go in peace.”*** How could those words really apply to us?

We would like to think that, if we just underplay the seriousness of sin in general, and of our sins in particular, we won't need to have much forgiveness. Which then will not require of us much change in our behaviors, attitudes, values, and relationships, and will minimize the danger of being exposed to the wrath of God.

That last is key here; we all carry within us the vestiges of works righteousness. We think God is going to require of us certain things and if we do not deliver, well . . . you know . . . perfection. We are inclined to think that because Jesus did say, ***“Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect”*** [Matthew 5:48]. But here's God's message: ***“I know you think you've got something coming to you, but I laid all my wrath on Jesus. Sorry, none left for you.”***

The Good News is that simple and that good. Your sins are forgiven. Not forgiven, *if* . . . Not forgiven on the installment plan (you know, a little

forgiveness now, and then we'll see how you do). Not forgiven, *sort of* . . . Forgiven! So now, anything and everything becomes response, not precondition. There is nothing to earn, nothing to purchase, nothing to demonstrate worthiness, nothing to try to placate God.

Jesus ***“said to the woman, ‘Your faith has saved you; go in peace.’”*** I would have liked to hear what she did. Did she go in peace? Did she truly know herself to be whole? Did that condition ooze out in her relationships? Did others see the change in her and wonder? Did she tell others about what Jesus said and did?

Luke does not give us that information. Instead He continues to tell us what Jesus did. It is interesting in those following chapters how frequent is the mention of women and their responses to Jesus (including some described as “prominent women”!) . . . I say “interesting” because in Jesus’ world, women were not considered at all important. Luke does have twenty-four chapters, and this is just the beginning of chapter eight, so we know that Luke has a lot more to tell us.

But let’s stay in this chapter for the moment, and soak in the message God wants us to have here — without any downpayment from us, without any performance assessment, without any assurance that we will value it or make proper use of it . . . God forgives. This woman — this “sinner” — was restored. Woman or man, prominent or not, ready to admit the depth of sin or living in denial . . . so are you.

Amen.