

**Extravagant Worship-** September 27th, 2015  
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Scripture Reading: Luke 7: 36-50

This morning I would like us to look more closely at the gospel story that I just read to uncover God's message to us about "Extravagant Worship!" It is based on the gospel story in Luke 7: 36-50. If you are expecting some homework from me today, it would be interesting for you to look for the parallel story in the gospel of Matthew and Mark.

At first blush, the setting of this story is unremarkable. We meet Simon, a Pharisee... a religious man...with considerable status within his local community. He was hosting a meal in his home for Jesus and some other invited guests, likely just after Jesus had spoken in the synagogue.

Then we meet Jesus... an itinerant teacher/rabbi of the day who had attracted quite a following. Jesus accepted Simon's invitation to share a meal at Simon's home.

What does seem a bit unusual to us now is that people, who were not invited for the meal, would be welcome to come to Simon's house to hear the visiting rabbi discuss his teachings. The townspeople would enter through a side door. They would sit along the wall where the invited guests were eating... a type of outer circle, and inner circle if you wish. How unusual a similar scene would seem to us today... Jonathan and Kate inviting the elders to their home for a meal and to meet the visiting preacher...and us slipping in the back door and

sitting on the stairs or in the kitchen so that we could overhear the conversation going on in the dining room!

In this story, we meet one such uninvited person who slipped in the side door- she was the “woman of ill repute” or “the immoral woman” ... a commonly understood synonym for the village prostitute.

So the story has three characters-

- Simon the Pharisee,
- Jesus the rabbi,
- and the unnamed prostitute.

As we know, Jesus was not what we would call “a friend of the Pharisees”. For the Pharisees, the jury was still out on Jesus...Was this man Jesus really an authoritative prophet? How could they tell? Was he the Messiah that had been promised? Many Pharisees were trying to find ways to catch Jesus in blasphemy, or to find him breaking the Jewish laws. At every opportunity, they tried to undermine Jesus’ credibility in front of others.

Many middle-eastern cultural norms were very different from those that we are accustomed to today. The most interesting difference is that middle-eastern culture was known as an “honour and shame” culture...whereas our culture has become very individualistic, their culture was more of a group culture. People were very concerned

about maintaining the honour of the kinship group that they belonged to. Women maintained honour for the family by their modest, moral behavior and dress. Men could increase their family honour through engaging in and winning verbal debates. We would call them “one-upmanship” contests! The name of this type of debating was known as challenge and riposte.

What were the unwritten rules of challenge and riposte?

- people in the contest had to be from the same social status- so a debate between Simon the Pharisee and Jesus the rabbi would be a fair match
- in the eyes of the witnesses to the debate, the winner of the verbal contest gained honour and the person losing the debate lost honour

We would call this “losing face”.

In all the Gospel stories, Jesus shows considerable skill at this contest of challenge and riposte. In coming to Simon’s for dinner, Jesus knew that Simon would try to catch him out or put him on the “hot seat”. Challenge and riposte was the “not so hidden agenda.”

On the surface, not knowing any better, we would assume that this was a friendly social gathering. So how do WE the readers know Simon’s motivation for this dinner? A few questions about social etiquette leads us to the obvious answer...

- Where were the servants when Jesus, the invited guest, arrived?
- Where was the basin and towel for washing the guests' feet?
- Where was the sweet -smelling oil for anointing the guests' head?
- Where was Simon? Why did he not greet Jesus with a kiss of welcome and direct his servants to show honour to their guest?

The story tells us simply that Jesus went to the Pharisee's house and reclined at table. Although Simon was the host, it seems that he forgot the social niceties that should be shown to a guest. Or a more likely scenario is that he discarded the social niceties intentionally when it came to Jesus. Simon was on a mission...a mission to show up his guest.

As it turns out, the unforeseen arrival of the village prostitute provided Simon with an unexpected but welcome "Gotcha" moment. The stage was now set in Simon's mind for Jesus to be put in His place... to be reduced in status in the eyes of Simon's friends.

But then an unusual thing happened. Against all cultural norms, Jesus stopped eating and interacting with the table guests. Rather he turned to the prostitute and received her loving and extravagant act of worship. The prostitute lay on the floor with her head near Jesus' feet. She cried so much that she bathed his feet with her tears. Not having a towel, she let

down her hair and dried his feet with her hair. She then anointed them with sweet smelling expensive oil. We might have said that her worship of Jesus was “over the top”.

Simon observed the actions of the prostitute woman in stunned silence. He was caught off guard. He was literally speechless! But his silence spoke volumes...on the outside Simon resembled a duck- cool, calm and collected on the surface...while all the while his feet were paddling furiously under the water. He started thinking the problem through logically...how could he recover the upper hand? Simon came up with two premises.

His first premise was that if Jesus were really a prophet, he would know that this woman was an immoral woman. In fact, this premise was true because in verse 47, Jesus identifies that her sins are many...

His second premise was that if Jesus knew this woman was a sinner, He would have nothing to do with her. But his second premise proved to be false.

You see, the Pharisees prided themselves with being separate from “sin”. The important phrase here is “the Pharisees prided themselves”. The sin that jumped out at Jesus was Simon’s sin of Pride- the very sin that Simon was blinded to. Even the name “Pharisee” is a derivative of the word “separate”. Holiness for them meant being separated from sinful people, sinful places, and sinful practices...the village prostitute’s unexpected arrival would be a test case for Simon...if Jesus responded in love and compassion towards the woman it would prove that Jesus was not a prophet, because if he were, Jesus would

recognize that a prostitute's presence in Simon's home would defile his purity and he should have nothing to do with her.

Simon didn't realize that Jesus DID know the woman's character and yet still loved and cared for her.

So immediately after the prostitute's display of extravagant worship, Jesus looked at both the woman and Simon and addressing Simon said , Simon, I have something to tell you, Jesus said.

"Tell me, teacher," Simon said. And Jesus replied with a parable.

<sup>41</sup> "Two people owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii,<sup>[a]</sup> and the other fifty. <sup>42</sup> 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?"

<sup>43</sup> Simon replied, "I suppose the one who had the bigger debt forgiven."

"You have judged correctly," Jesus said.

Jesus taught that THE ONE WHO WAS FORGIVEN MORE, LOVED MORE. THE ONE WHO WAS FORGIVEN MORE, LOVED MORE. You see the prostitute came to Simon's house for only one reason.... so that she could be with Jesus. She knew that although everyone else rejected her, Jesus would not reject her. The lavish, extravagant love that the woman showed to Jesus was a response to God's grace shown to her. Her love was a response to Jesus' forgiveness of her, an act of extravagant worship.

It would have been considered rude for Jesus to rebuke Simon, the host, in this way in front of the other guests. Nevertheless, Jesus broke with the rules of challenge and riposte because he saw this as a teachable moment... And I quote v. 44

Then turning toward the woman, he said to Simon, "Do YOU see THIS woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. <sup>45</sup>You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. <sup>46</sup>You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment.

Jesus challenged Simon to actually see this anonymous woman as a fellow human being... to see this woman as she was, a precious child of God...as a woman who was loved and forgiven by God.

Jesus then says to the woman, "your faith has saved you, go in peace."

What did that faith look like? Quite simply, the woman believed that if she came to Jesus, Jesus would not send her away...the Pharisees might be intimidating but she didn't let fear of what others might think lessen her resolve...The remarkable thing is that of all the possible people at this dinner, she was the only one that Jesus says left the dinner forgiven...

Are you struck by how much the woman's worship of Jesus cost her? It cost her everything...it was extravagant worship... How do we know this?

- She had to come out of the darkness and into the light...out of the darkness and shame of her sinful lifestyle into the presence and light of God's redeeming love and forgiveness in Jesus...very simply, she had to come to Jesus in repentance...which she showed by crying so much that her tears were sufficient enough in quantity to wash Jesus' feet.
- She had to humble herself... We know that a woman's hair was highly prized in her culture and considered to be like a crown of glory, and yet she let it down and used it like a towel to dry Jesus' feet; the most dishonourable part of his body...she used her best to dry his worst.
- She had to disregard the cultural taboo of ministering to a man, of touching a man who was not her husband. If she were a married woman, this action would have been punishable by death.
- She had to repurpose the expensive mixed oils in the alabaster jar that she used in her occupation into a love offering to Jesus, pouring them out and expending them on her worship of Him...this act was an act of repentance, literally of turning and facing the other direction...of giving up her lifestyle and giving herself to Jesus...of giving up her precious oil to show Jesus her love.



The application of Jesus' teaching to us is a challenging one for each of us ...the question he asked Simon...Do YOU see THIS woman...is a question that we need to ask ourselves... Do YOU see THIS woman??? Do I see THIS woman? We too are often blinded by this same attitude as the Pharisees ...the attitude that says we are different from, better than, more worthy than or separate from THOSE people.

Jesus calls both his audience and his readers to self-reflection with an example that was very vivid...how did Jesus himself treat the lowest of the low in his society?... the village prostitute...the one who was scorned and rejected but at the same time was "used" for her services in a society-sanctioned duplicitous double standard. When we actually see this woman through the compassionate and loving eyes of Jesus, everything changes.

Everything changes. We would do well to examine ourselves and to follow her example of extravagant loving worship.

1. Her worship of Jesus was focused and intentional.
2. Her worship of Jesus was offered in a spirit of humility.
3. Her worship of Jesus was extravagant. It involved her repenting of her lifestyle...it cost her literally everything.

You see worship means ascribing worth to God... it is done at the feet of Jesus- acknowledging his greatness and our unworthiness. ... assuming an attitude of

submission and respect for God who is the object of our worship...and in an act of servitude doing everything for Jesus in a spirit of love and adoration and service.

How would you characterize your worship? How would I characterize my worship?

The example of the prostitute woman gives us all an opportunity to examine our own hearts. The prostitute woman did not put on a layer of respectability when she approached Jesus. She did not hide her true self, her vulnerability, her sinfulness or her shame.

Let's come to Jesus like the prostitute did, with single-minded devotion, and cast our burdens down before him, seeking his face in repentance. Let us give up the attitudes that cause us to judge others with critical spirits. Leave behind the sin of pride that blinds us, weighs us down and distracts us from God. Give it all to Jesus...the good, the not-so-good and the very bad. Be assured that there is no hierarchy of sin with God ...He knows us, he sees us, he hears us, he welcomes us and he loves us! Embrace the freedom that God's unconditional love gives us and approach him anew in costly, extravagant worship, for the glory of God and the sake of all of God's children for whom Christ died.

AMEN