

Title: The Forgiving Presence of God
Text: Luke 7:36-50
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I have an embarrassing secret. Actually I have a few, but I am only going to tell you one this morning. Here it is; I really like chick flicks. I really like Romantic comedies. I mean, I pretend I don't, but really I do. I love them – you see, I am a hopeless romantic. A couple of years after we were married Sue and I went and saw the film Ghost, starring Demi Moore and Patrick Swayze. It's a real tear jerker. The cinema was absolutely packed and we were right at the back and as the film finished and the lights came up, Sue turned and looked at me incredulous and said, 'You've been crying!' I had and I was. Hopeless.

I love hearing, watching and reading stories of extravagant love and devotion. Around Valentine's Day this year I came across this letter to a magazine, published on the internet. Now, I don't know if the letter is genuine, or the story it tells has been manufactured. I want it to be true. All I know is that when I first read it, I got a little misty. The letter is written by Sue Johnston, 68, from Houston, Texas:

My sweet husband John and I were married for 46 years. Each Valentines Day, he'd send me the most beautiful flowers containing a note with five simple words, 'My love for you grows.' Four children, 46 bouquets and a lifetime of love was his legacy to me when he passed away two years ago.

On my first Valentines Day alone, 10 months after I lost him, I was shocked to receive a gorgeous bouquet addressed to me...from John. Angry and heartbroken, I called the florist to say there had been a mistake. The florist replied, 'No ma'am it's not a mistake. Before he passed away, your husband prepaid for many years and asked us to guarantee that you'd continue getting bouquets every Valentines Day.' With my heart in my throat, I hung up the phone and read the attached card. It said, 'My love for you is eternal.'

Don't you want that to be true! I love it – I love this beautiful story of extravagant love and devotion that continues even beyond death.

Extravagance is defined as acting without normal, reasonable or expected restraint.

In a moment we are going to hear from the bible a story of extravagant love and devotion of a nameless woman, who herself was responding to the extravagant love and forgiveness she had experienced in an encounter with Jesus.

In much of his public ministry Jesus acted and spoke extravagantly – without normal, reasonable or expected restraint.

At Cana; he didn't just turn water into wine; he turned water into the best vintage.

At Bethany, he didn't just heal Lazarus; he raised him from the dead.

On the Galilean shore he didn't just turn five loaves and fish into a banquet for thousands; he made sure everyone went home with a Tupperware container full.

In the temple, Jesus didn't just politely protest the money changers; he turned over their tables and chased them out of the sanctuary.

On the lake while a storm raged, Jesus didn't just sleep in the back of the boat; with a word he calmed the wind and the waves.

On the same lake, Jesus didn't just walk on water; he called Peter out of the boat to meet him.

In a house where men lowered their paralyzed friend into Jesus' midst, he didn't just heal him; he simultaneously forgave the man's sins.

Jesus acted extravagantly; without normal, reasonable or expected restraint.

Similarly, in his teaching, Jesus acted without normal, reasonable or expected restraint; making radical claims considered blasphemous by many who heard them, like 'I am the Way, the truth and the life. No one comes to Father, except by me.'

In the end, it was his extravagant, unrestrained and unexpected actions and teaching that lead to his betrayal, arrest and crucifixion – which in turn was his most extravagant action, and the most extravagant example of God's love for us. But more on that later; let's get to the story, which we find in Luke's gospel:

When one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him, he went to the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table. 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. 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.

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."
(Luke 7:36-39)

Let's unpack the first part of this story a little. In Luke's gospel it is set amidst a set of rolling confrontations that Jesus has with the Pharisees. The Pharisees were the religious conservatives of Jesus' day, the orthodox Jews of their time. They were serious about the bible – and not just studying it, but living it out. They devoted their lives to aligning their lives with their understanding of what the bible taught. They were committed to living biblically pure lives. In fact, the root of the word Pharisee actually means 'pure' or 'separated'. Pharisees saw themselves as the 'separated ones', separated from all that was impure and unclean.

This was the basis of much of their antagonism towards Jesus. Jesus broke all their rules. He ignored all the pharisaical taboos. In fact, in the verses we just read, Jesus broke three taboos that were sacrosanct to Pharisees; the divisions between insiders/outsiders, women/men and clean/unclean. Let me explain.

The dinner invitation to Jesus was part of the ongoing and escalating conflict between the Pharisees and Jesus. This was no relaxed dinner party for friends; this was a staged opportunity for the Pharisees to interrogate Jesus and hopefully show him up for the charlatan they believed he was. The setting would have been similar to this photo, with the dinner guests lying on their left sides up against a low table, from which they would eat with their right hand. Their feet would have been directed outwards from the table. While the guests were gathered around the table, for an event like this the doors and gates of the host's home would deliberately be left open so that others not invited could find a place to watch and listen to what happened. This was both a private dinner and a public spectacle. The rules and customs were simple; only invited guests at the table – the insiders – could speak. Those not at the table – the outsiders - were to be seen and not heard, and certainly were not to approach the table under any circumstances. In failing to rebuke the woman – the outsider - when she not only approaches the table, but then scandalously washes his feet with expensive perfume, tears and then her hair – Jesus breaks taboo number one.

The second division that Jesus ignored was that between women and men. Pharisaical custom applied very strict interpretations of the Torah – the Jewish law – about interactions between women and men. The Jewish Talmud actually speaks of nine different categories of Pharisees, including the "bleeding" Pharisees, who (almost comically) in their eagerness to avoid looking on a woman shut, or even at times blindfolded their eyes and so bruised themselves to the point of bleeding by stumbling against walls. Pharisees avoided physical and even eye contact with women other than their wife in the belief that such contact would defile them. For the Pharisees, and it must be said for most people of his day, Jesus broke taboo number two when he allowed a woman to perform such an intimate act as washing his feet – in touching his body with her hands and her hair and her tears. This was truly scandalous.

And this leads us to the third taboo that Jesus shattered– the dividing line between clean and unclean. Luke tells us she was not just a woman, but a woman who lived a 'sinful life'. We don't know what her sin was- Luke doesn't tell us, but most likely it was sexual. What we do know is that her sin wasn't a secret; everyone knew. She wore a label; 'Sinner'. As a sinner, she was considered spiritually unclean. The Pharisees considered that any contact with a sinner made you unclean as well; that in effect you caught their spiritual disease. This was perhaps the most important taboo Jesus broke when he allowed the woman to kneel and wash his feet with her tears.

Earlier this year I came across this picture in an online article on Huffington Post. It is an Orthodox Jewish man, wrapped in a plastic bag, sitting on a plane most likely is departing Tel Aviv in Israel. Bizarre. What is the explanation? The article suggests that the man is a Kohein, a descendent of the priests of Israel. Why the plastic bag? In Jewish law, and particularly for priests, there

are specific prescriptions about avoiding contact with the dead, including cemeteries. There are a number of cemeteries located near Tel Aviv airport and it is suggested the custom of wearing a plastic bag is to provide a barrier between him and the cemetery even as the plane flies over it, making sure he keeps ritually clean. The article goes on to say that some planes even adjust their flight paths to avoid cemeteries.

For orthodox Jews, as for the Pharisees the dividing line between clean and unclean was clear, as was the obligation to protect your purity by avoiding contact with that which was unclean – which most definitely included a ‘sinful woman’. How could Jesus claim to be ‘clean’ when he allowed the ‘unclean’ to touch him, seemingly even seeking them out?

His host, Simon the Pharisee, knows this and has a conversation with himself, ‘How can this man be a prophet if he allows such an outrageous action to happen?’

Make no mistake, the dramatic story Luke tells was no accident. Jesus knew his reputation. He had heard the disdainful word of his accusers. Speaking of Jesus, they would say:

(Jesus) is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.
(Luke 7:34)

Because we Australians are fierce egalitarians who cheer for the underdog, and who don’t mind a drink and a good feed, we can hear this statement as a compliment, which it most certainly was not. We risk missing just how deeply offensive this statement was to everyone who heard it. Let’s read how Jesus responds. As he often would, he offers a story:

Jesus answered him, “Simon, I have something to tell you.”

“Tell me, teacher,” he said. “Two people owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii and the other fifty. 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?” Simon replied, “I suppose the one who had the bigger debt forgiven.” “You have judged correctly,” Jesus said.

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. 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.”

(Luke 7:40-47)

In Jesus’ day it was common at dinner parties for guests to pose riddles to one another. Jesus poses Simon a very simple riddle of two forgiven debtors; one whose debt was the equivalent of a year and half’s salary, the other’s, a month and a half. Importantly, neither had the ability to repay their debt. Simon had the sense he might be walking into a well set trap, but answers Jesus’ question reluctantly – that the one forgiven the larger debt will love the generous lender more than the one forgiven the smaller debt. It makes sense, and Jesus tells him he is right. But it is a backhanded compliment at best.

Turning to the woman, Jesus affirms her extravagant devotion – the foot-washing, the kisses and the perfume. It was with this extravagant devotion that the woman revealed a heart overflowing with gratefulness and love. The woman honored Jesus with her devotion, while Simon dishonored him by not even supplying the basic expectations of a dinner guest – water to wash dusty feet, a kiss of greeting and freshening perfume.

It is really important to see the order in which this story unfolds. Jesus says that the woman’s extravagant devotion is her response to the forgiveness she has already received.

‘Her many sins have been forgiven – as her great love has shown’

Just as a man forgiven a large debt will love the one who wiped that debt out, so with her extravagant act of devotion, the woman demonstrates her love for Jesus. The basis of her loving devotion is previously extended forgiveness. Luke does not tell us when and how the woman experienced Jesus’ forgiveness. But this we know; her extravagant devotion was a response to forgiveness, not effort to earn it. That’s the nature of grace; you can’t earn it, you simply received it. At some point and in some way through an encounter with Jesus the woman had experienced grace – the undeserved, unmerited favor of God – and with it unexpected,

unrestrained and seemingly unreasonable forgiveness. Her past no longer defined her; the love of Jesus did. Grace, by its very nature, is extravagant. And when truly experienced it usually provokes an extravagant response.

Alan Scott puts it this way:

The beauty of grace is that it creates a space where people who have a past can have a future.
(Alan Scott)

Because of Jesus, this woman with a past now has a future. Let's finish the story:

Then Jesus said to her, "Your sins are forgiven."
The other guests began to say among themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?"
Jesus said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."
(Luke 7:48-50)

When Jesus tells the woman that her sins are forgiven he is confirming what has already taken place. It is a public declaration, and the fourth and most scandalous taboo that Jesus breaks in this story. For good reason the guests mutter amongst themselves, 'Who is this who even forgives sins?' For Pharisees, indeed for all Jews, the clear understanding was that it was God's prerogative alone to forgive sins. Jesus' words would have been considered blasphemous; the equivalent of declaring himself equal with God. Simon wondered to himself how Jesus could call himself a prophet; but what he discovered was that Jesus saw himself as far more than a prophet.

Jesus' final words are for the woman, 'Your faith has saved you; go in peace.' Faith here is the implicit trust that the woman has placed in Jesus to be able to forgive her. Through faith she has received – not in any way earned - the free gift of forgiveness that Jesus offered her. This faith, this trust in Jesus' ability to forgive her, saves her from the penalty of her debt and allows her to leave with a peace, a stillness of heart and contentment of soul, that passes all human understanding. This unnamed woman was no longer a sinner; she was a sinner saved by grace.

Extravagant forgiveness has been received by faith, and in turn celebrated with extravagant devotion.

This story is our story; it's my story, it's your story. You see, our story is found in the story of the woman, and that of the two debtors in Jesus' riddle.

Like the two debtors, we have a debt we cannot repay.

The debt we owe is to God and is caused by our sin – our rebellion against God in thought, word and deed. The bible tells us, and if we are honest, our experience confirms that all of us have sinned, and so fall short of the glory of God. I've shared this quote from Andy Stanley earlier this year:

Either you were a mess, are a mess, or are one dumb decision away from becoming a mess.
(Andy Stanley)

The bible also tells us that the wages, or the consequences of our sin is death; eternal separation from God. Because of our sin we are, if you like, unclean outsiders – where our many imperfections exclude us from the perfect presence of God.

This is the bad news that in that makes the good news of the gospel just so good.

You see, as pervasive and destructive as our sin is, God's forgiving grace is all the more powerful. The Apostle Paul puts it this way, reading from the Message Translation:

Sin didn't, and doesn't, have a chance in competition with the aggressive forgiveness we call grace.
(Romans 5:20)

Some of us live with a sense of guilt and shame that casts a shadow over everything. We can't shake it off. But God's grace is and always will be greater than our guilt. Erwin Lutzer puts it this way:

There is more grace in God's heart than there is sin in your past.

(Erwin Lutzer)

Is all this talk of grace delusional? Is it just a case of wishful thinking? The answer to these questions is in the symbol that lies at the heart of Christianity; the cross of Christ. On the meaning of the cross, Paul says:

God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.
(Romans 5:20)

Simply put, on the cross, Jesus took bore the punishment of our sin, absorbed it into himself and so paid the debt we could not pay. Louie Giglio puts it this way:

The Jesus story is not that He wants to condemn you, but that He was condemned for you.
(Louie Giglio)

In his resurrection, Jesus defeated sin and death and through faith we too can share in his victory.

Faith is not something we do, but someone we trust. Faith is activated when we confess our sin and profess Jesus as Lord – that is we entrust our lives to him. Again, the apostle Paul says”

It is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God.
(Ephesians 2:8)

It is the strength of God’s amazing grace that saves us; grace that we receive as a gift through faith. It is a gift we can choose to receive or reject.

In the United States in the early 19th century, George Wilson, a postal clerk, robbed a train and in the process killed a guard. The court convicted him and sentenced him to hang. Because of public sentiment against capital punishment, however, a movement began to secure a presidential pardon for Wilson, and eventually President Jackson intervened with a pardon.

Here is the amazing thing; Wilson refused it.

Since this had never happened before, the Supreme Court was asked to rule on whether someone could actually refuse a presidential pardon. The Chief Justice handed down the court's decision. Let me read it to you in part:

"A pardon is a parchment whose only value must be determined by the receiver of the pardon. It has no value apart from that which the receiver gives to it. George Wilson has refused to accept the pardon. We cannot conceive why he would do so, but he has. Therefore, George Wilson must die." G

George Wilson, as punishment for his crime, was hanged. Pardon, declared the Supreme Court, must not only be granted, it must be accepted.

Through the death and resurrection of Christ, God has declared pardon for your sins and offered you the gift of eternal life. This is extravagant love. But here is the thing; for that pardon to be activated you must receive it, not earn it – but receive it by faith – by confessing your sin and professing Christ as Lord and trusting your future to him.