

“Salvation's First Gift”

Luke 7:36-50

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All of us have, at one time or another, wronged someone. You've said something you shouldn't have. You stepped over a line. You offended or snubbed or hurt a person in some way. You borrowed something, and didn't give it back.

You know what I'm talking about.

There are a million different ways we accidentally, recklessly, or intentionally wrong another person. Sometimes it's so slight that when happens, we don't even notice. But then later it dawns on you: “Shoot, I messed up. I need to fix this.” And sometimes, when the offense occurs, it's such a big deal, that neither of you can deal with it right away, so you just go your separate ways for a while.

Usually, if this happens with a family member, we deal with it fairly quickly. But sometimes, if it's a friend, an acquaintance, a neighbor, or a co-worker, it may be a while, and the longer it goes, the more there builds up this burden and barrier that makes it harder. It's like wearing a back back of full of guilt, and every time you see, or even think of the other person, you add in another rock of blame or urgency. Often it takes, what a young man whom I hadn't seen in two years, and who popped by the office this week, called, “10 seconds of insane courage.”

In Alcoholics Anonymous, this is called “Step Five”: *We admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.*¹ But when you finally take that step, “Oh what a relief it is,” right?

To borrow again from AA's Big Book:

*If we have come to know how wrong thinking and action have hurt us and others, then the need to quit living by ourselves with those tormenting ghosts of yesterday gets more urgent than ever. We have to talk to somebody about them.*²

1 *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, c. 1952 AAWS.

2 *Ibid.* p. 55.

And when we finally do, the relief, the release, the removal of this growing, festering, guilt that has been gnawing away at our souls for weeks, or months, or even years, finally sets us free! And often that relief comes, even before other person says, “I forgive you.”

Can you identify with that feeling?

That's what's going on in the gospel story in Luke 7:36-50.

The woman in the story is known around town as “a sinner.” We don't know what her sins were. It's often assumed she was a prostitute, which is the first thing people seemed to assume about a woman, or accuse a woman of in that culture, if she in any way didn't fit into the narrow box and role that was allowed for women. No doubt, she heard herself called “whore” more than once.

It could be that she had an illegitimate child. It could be that she stole fruit from the market. It could be that her boyfriend was a Roman, or a tax collector, or Samaritan. It could be that she was an alcoholic. It could be she went around gossiping about her neighbors. It could be that she was a lousy housekeeper. It could have been all of those things, as it often is when a person falls into a pattern or trap of wrong living.

Jesus says, “Her sins were many.” (v. 47)

And this woman, who knew her sins were many, who carried them around in an unbearable load of guilt and shame and self-loathing, who wore them like layers of filthy rags and cheap mascara, finds out that Jesus is in the house of this fancy schmancy, goody, goody, Pharisee, and in 10 seconds of insane courage, she bursts into the dinner party, and collapses in a puddle at Jesus' feet.

Who cannot be moved by this scene? It's one of the most beautiful, tender moments in all of Scripture.

She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment. (v. 38)

We could get a lot of mileage out of looking at Simon, the pious Pharisee, who immediately climbs up on his moral high horse, and says to himself, “*If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and*

what kind of woman this is who is touching him.” (v. 39) But I want to focus instead on what happens between Jesus, and woman.

We're trying to get a handle on what Bible means when it talks about salvation. In the last verse of this story, we see that word again: *"Your faith has saved you; go in peace"* (v. 50).

It's pretty clear what salvation means in this context. It means forgiveness.

Jesus says to Simon, *"Her sins, which were many, have been forgiven."* Did you catch the past tense? *"Her sins, which were many."* Did you catch the perfect tense – which denotes past action with present effects: *"have been forgiven."* Even before he says a word to her. Even before she says a word to him. ***Have been*** forgiven.

But Jesus does not announce this is a theological fact. He doesn't just say it to make a point to the religious people in room. Because he turns to the woman, who is still kneeling at his feet, and says *to her*, *"Your sins are forgiven."*

This forgiveness is not just some transaction that takes place in heaven, some matter of accounting in God's Big Book. It happens right there, in that moment, in the life, the emotions, the scars, the hurt, the guilt, the shame this woman has been carrying around her for years.

Luke doesn't say what woman did next, but *we* know, don't we? She cried even harder. But now they were tears of relief, of release, of hope maybe for the first time in her life. That she was *not* a dirty person. That maybe life *could* be different. That she had value and worth. Because Jesus, the man, who she knew was not just a man, had called her *"woman."* Because Jesus had looked at her as a person. Because Jesus said to her, *"Your sins are"* - note now, the present tense - *"forgiven."*

The Apostle Paul says,

The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. (1 Tim 1:15),

and the first gift, the first experience of salvation is the realization, the knowledge, the understanding, the *feeling* of relief that comes from hearing *from God*, *"You are forgiven."*

You are forgiven.

The issue, of course is what those at table began to say to selves: "*Who is this who even forgives sins?*" (v. 49b)

Who indeed?

To go to someone we have slighted, or offended in some way, and make amends, and set things right, and hear that person say, "It's okay. We're good. I forgive you" is one thing. It's a *great* thing, in fact. We all screw up. We all blow it with even the people we love, sometimes. Maybe lots of times.

But with God?

If we do what AA calls "a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves" we soon realize that it's not just all of the little screw ups, or even major screw ups in our lives that we need to admit to God, that we need forgiveness for. It's that they are in the very fiber of our beings. We can't *NOT* screw up.

When David says, in Psalm 51, "*In sin did my mother conceive me*" (v. 5, KJV) he doesn't mean that his mother's act of conception was a sin. He means he was a sinner from moment he was conceived. In the womb.

Who teaches an infant to be selfish? Who instructs a toddler to lie straight to your face? (Those sweet, innocent little cherubs!). Where do children learn to hit other children? Why do teens almost automatically form into cliques, and bully the weak and the weird?

"*In sin did my mother conceive me,*" says David. "*My sin is ever before me.*" (v. 3) "In the whole world of sinners," says Paul, "*I am the foremost.*" (1 Timothy 1:15)

God does not excuse our sins. Jesus never said to woman, "Don't worry, you're not that bad." He didn't say, "You're no worse than anyone else." He says, "Your sins (though they are many) are forgiven." I accept your admission of guilt, your genuine act of repentance. And *I RELEASE YOU OF YOUR GUILT!* You are forgiven."

But notice that's not the *last* thing Jesus says to her.

Jesus turns to her a second time, and says, “*Your faith has saved you.*” (v. 50).

What faith?

The faith that Jesus would accept her. The faith, expressed in 10 seconds of insane courage to present herself to Jesus, broken as she was. The faith that Jesus could do something about her heaviness, her hurt, and the hideousness she felt about herself.

And this faith saved her. Right there, and then. No formula prayer. No baptism. No doctrinal test. Just, *BOOM*, “You’re saved!”, that is, “rescued and delivered in the sense of averting some danger threatening life.”³ Delivered from the mortal danger, the life threatening burden of guilt from sin. “Your faith has saved you,” and now listen to this: “Go in peace.”

Go with peace of mind. Go with peace in your heart. Go, knowing that you are at peace with me. Go, knowing that through me, “*God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of [my] cross.* (Colossians 1:20).

Jesus didn't say those last words to the woman, of course. But he does say them to us today. Because the first gift of salvation is still the forgiveness that God offers, not just from the eternal penalty of our sins, but from the present burden of them.

Ted Dekker introduces his novel, *A.D. 30*, about a young Bedouin woman who encounters Jesus, by telling the reader why he wrote the book. “*To be set free from my own chains*” he writes. And then he asks, *What about you? You're saved in the next life as a matter of sound doctrine, but do you often feel powerless and lost in this life?*

The beginning of being saved, is receiving the grace of God, that comes from admitting our guilt, sometimes collapsing in a puddle at Jesus' feet, and hearing him say, “You are forgiven. Go in peace.”

AMEN.

3 The dictionary definition of the Greek word for *sozo* which is translated into “to save” in English.