

Near the Cross 1: FINDING OURSELVES
Luke 7:36-50 (2/14/16)

Today we begin our Lenten journey—six weeks that take us to that glorious celebration of Easter. To get to Resurrection Day, however, we must go by way of the cross. There's no other way. So for these six Sundays, focus with me, please, on drawing ever nearer to the cross of Jesus.

Most of us know the old hymn, *Jesus, Keep Me Near the Cross*. It's one of Fanny Crosby's best known and loved hymns--so widely appreciated that it's been published in 569 different hymnals. Let's sing the first verse together now.

Jesus, keep me near the cross, There a precious fountain;
 Free to all, a healing stream, Flows from Calv'ry's mountain.
 In the cross, in the cross Be my glory ever,
 Till my ransomed soul shall find Rest beyond the river.

To get us started, I want to ask a question. Where do we find ourselves in the story of Jesus? Keep this question in mind as we turn now to our text, **Luke 7:36-50**:

³⁶Now one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him, so he went to the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table. ³⁷When a woman who had lived a sinful life in that town learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's house, she brought an alabaster jar of perfume, ³⁸and 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.

³⁹When 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." ⁴⁰Jesus answered him, "Simon, I have something to tell you." "Tell me, teacher," he said.

⁴¹"Two men owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty.

⁴²Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he canceled the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?" ⁴³Simon replied, "I suppose the one who had the bigger debt canceled." "You have judged correctly," Jesus said.

⁴⁴Then 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. ⁴⁵You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. ⁴⁶You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet.

⁴⁷Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—for she loved much. But he who has been forgiven little loves little." ⁴⁸Then Jesus said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." ⁴⁹The other guests began to say among themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?" ⁵⁰Jesus said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

Jesus affects different people in different ways—have you noticed? Some people seem very serious about their commitment to Christ, while others—not so much.

Some are faithful, when from all appearances, many are faithless. One Christ follower becomes a "pillar of the church," while another is more like a "pad on the pew."

Why is this? Maybe we can learn something from the story before us today. Let's begin by taking a look at the various characters we find here. As we do, we may be surprised to find ourselves.

1. First, there's the woman. She's definitely the "surprise character" at this dinner party. Had things gone as planned, she wouldn't have been there at all.

But then, without her, there wouldn't have been a story to tell. The Bible doesn't record every meal Jesus enjoyed, only the ones where something unusual happened. This turned into one of those special meals.

A Pharisee invited Jesus to join him for dinner in his home. This was still early in Jesus' ministry. Not all the Pharisees had turned against him; so here was Jesus dining with the Pharisee, reclining at the table in the customary way for that day.

Then...she shows up—this woman. She hadn't been invited. She just hears that Jesus is there, so she goes too.

Keep in mind she was definitely not the kind of person the Pharisee wanted in his home. Luke describes her as "a woman who had lived a sinful life in that town"—likely...a prostitute.

Picture this scene: Jesus is having dinner with a respected member of the community, and in walks this unnamed "street walker." She goes straight to Jesus and begins to cry. Her tears cover his feet. This was awkward, but Jesus allows her to go on.

She lets down her long hair. In those days, it was unacceptable for a woman to unbind her hair in public—only a "loose" woman would do it. Well, this woman qualified.

She lets her hair down and then uses it to wipe her tears from Jesus' feet. She also kisses his feet...over and over again. She then completes this disruption of the dinner party by anointing His feet with a fragrant ointment, an expensive perfume.

By now, everyone's attention has been distracted away from the meal. She's embarrassed the host, setting herself up for a harsh

response from him; and, of course, there was the possibility that Jesus might reject her, too.

I think, given the boldness of her actions, we must assume that this was not her first encounter with Jesus. Either she had heard from others about him--or more likely, she had previously been in his presence, receiving from Jesus mercy and kindness.

Otherwise, why would she have taken such a great risk? And why would she have chosen to anoint Jesus' feet with perfume?

Directly or indirectly, Jesus had already in some way touched her sinful heart—so she crashes the party to pour out her soul in penitence and gratitude in the only way she knew to do it.

2. But now let's consider another character we find here: **the** most unhappy **host**--the alarmed, embarrassed, and terribly distraught host. From his perspective, the dinner party was ruined--scandalized by this woman of ill repute.

He'd been somewhat open to Jesus so far. He considered him to be a teacher, maybe even a prophet—but no more! Jesus had allowed this sinful woman to touch him!

Jesus knew what he was thinking, and as if to show the Pharisee that he really was a prophet, Jesus let him know that he knew. "Simon," he said. Jesus gets personal--uses the Pharisee's name.

"Simon, I have something to tell you." "Tell me, teacher," Simon replies. So Jesus shares with Simon this pointed parable of the two debtors. One debtor owes a large amount of money--five hundred denarii—that's almost two year's wages.

The other debtor owes a much smaller amount--just fifty denarii. But neither of them could repay their debt, so the moneylender simply forgives both debts.

Then Jesus asked Simon a question. Which debtor would be more grateful, which one would have more love in his heart for the moneylender who showed mercy and forgave those debts?

It wasn't a trick question. Simon answered it correctly. The one who was forgiven more would surely love more. I wonder: do you think Simon had any idea what was coming?

3. Now let's consider the third character in the story: **Jesus.**

Jesus sees this as an opportunity to make an unforgettable point. He turns to the woman, but He speaks to Simon: "Do you see this woman?"

Well, of course, he does. She's about the only thing he can see in the moment. He's probably staring at her with a most unpleasant expression on his face. Oh, he sees her all right!

Then Jesus talks about how the two of them had responded to Him. Simon had offered no water for Jesus to wash his feet when he came to dinner—that was a glaring omission of a common courtesy in that day. But the woman had washed Jesus' feet with her tears and dried them with her hair.

There's more. Simon did not welcome his guest with the customary kiss; but the woman...covered his feet with kisses. Simon offered no oil for Jesus' head—another custom of the day—but the woman anointed Jesus' feet with a precious ointment!

Jesus sums up the experience with this thunderbolt: **"Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—for she loved much. But he who has been forgiven little loves little."**

Now, would you call that honesty...or courage...or what...for Jesus to talk to his host like that? He certainly didn't pull any punches. The woman had many sins, and knew it. But evidently she had repented of those sins and was trying to make a fresh start.

Simon may well have had just as many sins, but they were of a different nature. Self-righteousness is much better accepted than promiscuity. It may well go unnoticed until we find ourselves in the presence of the One who looks inside our hearts.

Even if sin could be quantified in some way, and Simon was deemed to have fewer sins, he seems so unaware of any personal sin. No need for him to repent—and if he did, he wouldn't be looking for Jesus to forgive him—someone he felt to be inferior.

So here we have Jesus confronting the lives of two remarkably different people: a teary-eyed penitent prostitute...and a proud, holier-than-thou Pharisee. In this moment, Jesus attempts to teach them both a profound truth.

The truth goes something like this: the greater our sense of having been forgiven—forgiven through no merit of our own, but only because of God's undeserved gift--the more deeply we feel this, the more gratitude we have in our hearts for God--the kind of gratitude that eventually shows up in acts of discipleship-- things like worship, and service, and giving.

The woman felt her debt of sin to be 500 denarii and hopeless. The Pharisee saw his debt as 50 denarii at most, an amount he knew he could easily manage on his own.

The woman believed Jesus had cured her from a spiritual disease so severe that it had a mortality rate of 100%; but the Pharisee wouldn't own up to the spiritual equivalent of a common cold.

The woman was affected deeply by Jesus—but not Simon. This encounter had produced no real or lasting change in him. So Jesus had nothing more to say to Simon; but to this humble, grateful prostitute, Jesus said, "Your sins are forgiven."

4. Okay...so...where do we find ourselves in this story? Which character more closely represents the impact that Jesus Christ has had on **us**?

That's an important question because our answer will reveal a lot about our own commitment to Christ and our love for Him. So...

- 1) How much sin has Jesus forgiven us?
- 2) How big a price did Jesus pay to reconcile us to God?

Honest answers—answers that come from what we know in our hearts to be true—these answers matter, friends. They're clear indicators of whether Jesus has had any real impact on us.

The woman in our story realized her sinfulness; she felt the full load of her sin; she wept tears of remorse, and bowed down in grateful service to her Lord. She was profoundly affected!

Simon stood tall and hard-hearted, oblivious to his own sin, aware only of the sins of this woman who had dared to disrupt his dinner party. He remained essentially unmoved, unaffected, by Jesus.

This is the Gospel: God sent His one-and-only Son into the hopelessness of our lost condition to die on a cruel cross to save us from sin, death, and hell.

If we believe this Good News and embrace Christ Jesus as Savior, our lives are filled with such love and gratitude that we live as committed followers of Christ. And this will be obvious to those around us, friends. The change will be noticeable.

If we don't believe it--if we've never been convinced by the truth that we are died-for...because...this was the only way for us to be saved--then although we may claim otherwise, and our names may appear on the church roll, there will be no evidence of a true commitment to Jesus Christ, because we aren't! He's made no difference in us.

The woman loved Jesus so much because she knew how much she'd been forgiven. Jesus said to her, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace." In our heart of hearts, do we hear Jesus saying the same to us? Is He affecting our lives this much? If so, how do we know? More importantly, how would Jesus know?