

In the story today from Luke's Gospel [Luke 7:36-8:3] is a bit of a bit of a sleeper. Clearly the story of a woman who anointed Jesus with expensive, extravagant ointment was cherished by the early church. It shows up in all four gospel. In each of them the woman crashes a dinner party and anoints Jesus' feet with a jar of ointment so expensive, it's like she had given away her inheritance. Comparing the four stories each emphasizes things a bit differently:

In each she is shamed and then honoured. In each case somebody protests the use of such a valuable substance for anointing Jesus.

In each story Jesus' credentials as a prophet or as a socially-aware male of his day are called into question.

And in each telling of this story, Jesus defends the action of the woman.

But Luke is the one who really plays havoc with the status quo

1. Luke is the only one who doesn't put this well-remembered story immediately before Jesus' passion. He doesn't put it so close to Jesus' death that we make the connection between the anointing and the preparation for burial. Instead to cloaks it in the middle eastern ethos of hospitality

2. He fashions another context change by taking this story of anointing, placing it in the house of a Pharisee, mixing it with a parable and other teachings, to give us a startling image of forgiveness projected directly from the heart of God.

3. Luke was also the only one who did not use the woman's name and instead names the host - Simon the Pharisee

All accounts of this story agree that the ointment that the woman used wasn't just expensive but was extravagant. It was so pricey that those who witnessed the act of anointing were shocked, so shocked they remembered it well. It's the extravagance of the story that draws us in and makes us pay attention. It's the kind of extravagance we mostly see in relation to celebration.

Since it's June, many of us are attending weddings of family and friends. Weddings are surely times when families spend lavishly to celebrate the birth of a new family.

It's extravagant spending for two reasons. One is that it's not necessary. The final product is the same no matter how much we spend. Couples are just as married if they elope or have a \$100,000 extravaganza. The second reason weddings are extravagant is that they are celebrations of the day that don't necessarily insure the future. Spend that much money on a car or a house and you'll have an investment that might pay off in the future. But we celebrate extravagantly anyway, out of love and joy and gratitude, and perhaps hope.

Luke makes the connection between this extravagant action in Simon's house to something that's extravagantly odd about God. For Pharisees like Simon and for all others who attended the same Sunday School program, God has been taught as one

whose righteousness cannot endure sinners but saves only those like Simon who uphold the laws of God in all their purity.

But Jesus teaches a different lesson. He says that the depth of gratitude is proportional to a person's need for grace and forgiveness. The math is so simple Simon can't disagree. Luke connects grace and gratitude as Jesus reveals himself to be the one who has God's authority to forgive sins and as the one who shares God's generous intention to heal life, restore relationships and forgive the sinful. For a creditor to forgive a debt simply out of grace is indeed extravagant. Let's face it, even as Christians, we lean more toward Simon's interpretation of justice it simply seems more practical in the real world. I guess that's the tough challenge for us whenever we smell that extravagant ointment in the air. Are the core values of the Christian life - grace, love, mercy, forgiveness - really possible in our world or are they simply things that we hope God will bring about one day?

Now what about the alabaster jar. The alabaster jar is beautiful and valuable in its own right. Breaking the jar means losing its present value. Also, until the jar is broken, we really can't know what's truly inside it. So breaking the jar, cracking open what is familiar and known to us and allowing the mystery to emerge, takes a certain spirit of courage and faith. If we think of the alabaster jar as our own lives, it speaks of risk of going deeper into who we see ourselves to be. Most of us likely don't experience ourselves as public pariahs, as this woman did; but we all have experience of ourselves as sinful and broken. Perhaps we've spent most of our lives hiding those parts of ourselves, all the while secretly fearing that our brokenness might be all we really have. We resist acknowledging that even to ourselves, because doing so is so painful and feels so hopeless.

But because this woman has this particular encounter with Jesus she experiences something different. She knows Jesus sees her sin. Everyone there seems to know her situation in life. But he looks past it into the deeper truth because he sees her as she really is, the mystery that is hiding inside her life. And she begins to believe in the possibility of her own beauty. As she breaks the alabaster jar, she also allows her heart to be broken open. She exposes the wounds which have so long defined and confined her, allowing Jesus' healing light to fill and to make her whole. As the ointment pours out, so do her tears, and the room is filled with the beauty of her soul surfacing into new life.

And everything is transformed.

Because now she has been seen. Now she knows that she has standing in the heart of God. The seal of doubt is broken. And now she has been made whole. Will her life be perfect from now on? No. As Thomas Merton reminds us, as long as we are alive we are forever beginners. But she has been seen. Her slate has been cleared ... She has been set free. And she can go forth into the world knowing that in God's ledger - she is doing just fine. Isn't that what all of us experience when we truly meet Jesus - grace upon grace?

God, of surprises, Christ of the unexpected acts of love and compassion, Holy Spirit blowing where You will – we come to worship to be in Your presence.

So often all the words we use in our services and prayers inadvertently block us from being open to Your coming. As though with our finite mind we can grasp You, who is infinite. attune us, Lord, to Your presence in our lives. Sometimes when I look at the world or even what choices I make in my own life, I cannot understand that You are the creator of all, yet we see barrel bombs dropped, destroying the Syrian city of Aleppo, with civilians, hospitals, children and even pregnant women being targeted by snipers. All because of different stands in politics and religion.

We see this violence repeated in words and actions in so many countries. Lord, forgive our smallness of minds and hearts that betray the divine spark You breathed into us when You gave us life. We are like a house divided against itself. We celebrate the many, who like Jesus moving beyond the accepted customs of the day forgiving the woman judged a sinner, Reach out to protect and rescue the child brides in so many Asian, Middle Eastern and African cultures. We remember all the girls enslaved by Isis, the boys forced into becoming soldiers. Lord Christ, bring peace and justice to those in fear and oppression. Open the eyes of the oppressors to repent and seek healing and restitution.

In so many countries where inexplicable events are occurring in the run-up to elections, sometimes we despair in the choice of candidates available. Remind us that hope continues to exist if each one of us chooses to seek to build your kingdom of hope Lord, help us to hold up to Your loving light and healing power, all that is broken in us, our communities, our countries, and our world. May we rediscover the sacredness of all that You have created.

Then we will treat with love and care all that You have given us Amen.