

## Forgiveness

by Gregory Mobley  
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Luke 7:36-8.3

The banquet was not on a table made from a mound of Persian carpets, with the sheikhs sitting on pillows, sipping espresso and eating baklava and dried dates. The banquet was not on a bamboo mat with an elaborate tea service and silent Japanese women slipping in and out, replenishing, smiling, disappearing.

But it was something like one of those Oriental scenes: Jesus and a group of men dining, reclining, spread out around a low table, propped up on pillows, legs bent at the knees, feet angled toward the door, arms reaching for food and drink, banqueting at the home of a certain Simon, a devout Jewish man in a town somewhere in that region of Roman Palestine known as the Galilee. A male zone where women were welcome only to refill platters and cups.

Jesus speaks to two people. One is the host, Simon, a Pharisee. The Pharisees were Jewish men who chose a dual allegiance. They stayed in their families and livelihoods; they were embedded in the commerce of their villages, but they were true believers. They were more than hobbyists. They were re-enactors. Pharisees studied old traditions and lived with them in their imaginations. Pharisees practiced self-imposed disciplines of holy living that went beyond the demands of synagogue and most rabbis. Pharisees saw themselves as the last best hope in a world of slackers and accommodationists; they were the salt, the leaven, the righteous.

And Pharisees talked and debated and riddled and competed in games of Bible baseball and Targum tennis. The kind of competitive male conversations you hear on sports radio but, instead of: who was better: Babe Ruth or Willie Mays; it was who was better: Elijah or Elisha? instead of: who will be the next Michael; it was: who will be the next *mashiach*, the next anointed one, the next Messiah?

And so this Pharisee, Simon, was checking Jesus out; was evaluating him, and when he saw that Jesus did not go tense when this unholy woman entered the room, when he saw that Jesus did not recoil when she stood close, when he saw that Jesus did not protest when she did all those intimate physical things to him in front of a room full of people, Simon the Pharisee had seen all he needed he see. He said,

or thought, to himself: This fellow is no prophet; he's no John the Baptist; he's no Elijah. Prophets do this austere thing; prophets don't roll with the flow; they go against the grain; prophets swear off certain foods and certain clothes and wine and *pedicures* for God's sake and they do not allow women to touch them like that.

Jesus, who could read all this and who knew what Simon was thinking, also knew how to play this game and so he presented to Simon a pharisaical theological hypothetical, the kind of case-study a Pharisee could gnaw on for hours. "Which debtor most appreciates loan forgiveness: the man who owed 50 denarii [two months' wages] or the debtor who owed five hundred [almost two years']?" Simon knew there was a trick in it—it was too easy—but he walked in anyway; playing along in order to get to the real point. To defend himself, however, against the verbal surprise he knew was just around the corner, Simon armed himself with a "suppose": "I *suppose* the one for whom he canceled the greatest debt."

The other person to whom Jesus spoke was a woman. She is unnamed here in Luke but inquiring minds have suggested that her name was Mary, either a Mary from Bethany (John 11.2; 12.1-7), a village near Jerusalem, or a Mary from Magdala, a village near the Sea of Galilee; Mary Magdalene. Luke describes her as a sinner, and I think that we are supposed to think of her as a prostitute but, Lord knows, how brief the lapse, how picayune the misdemeanor it took for a 1st century Jewish girl in Galilee to acquire a reputation.

She is one more in a unlikely band of persons with whom Jesus seemed to feel completely at home. His real family: tax collectors, longshoremen, prostitutes, mobs of children who seemed to be raising themselves in dusty villages.

In Matthew (26.6-13) and Mark (14.3-9), there is a story similar to this one. There, during the final week of Jesus' life, an unnamed woman anoints Jesus' feet with perfume, and the disciples protest that this kind of extravagance is out of keeping with the principles of their movement. "The money spent on that perfume could have been used to feed the poor," they said. Jesus replies (in my ridiculously loose paraphrase), "Boys, feed the poor tomorrow. They'll still be here. Somebody else won't. Let me have this gift; let me have this moment; let my body feel this little ministrations."

In our story, in Luke, the woman behaves outrageously. Caught up in the Jesus-mania sweeping the Galilee in those days, she crashes the Pharisee's banquet to get a glimpse of her hero. She carries a jar,

made of alabaster quarried from the Jordan valley, containing perfume, probably nard, caravanned from the Himalayan mountains. But before she can apply the lotion, a different kind of jar opens inside her. The emotion of it all—the emotion of sneaking in, the emotion of the oppressive holiness of the Pharisee and his ilk that she had confronted every day she could remember; and don't you think there had to have been an emotion in Jesus' physical presence which drew you but also took your breath away—the emotion of it all spills out, spills over, onto Jesus' feet.

She has trespassed into this male space. She has forgotten to hide it all and mask it all like grown-ups do. She has let down her hair; she is rubbing her hair on Jesus' feet; she kissing his feet. The only times adults are so free are when they are overwhelmed with grief or in the privacy of physical intimacy or when they are playing with little children.

Jesus, completely in the moment, so free from reading any script except what loves demands, just rolls with it, accepts it. And at the end of the encounter, he says three sentences to her: “Your sins are forgiven.” “Your faith has saved you.” “Go in peace.”

“Go in peace” was one of the most commonplace phrases in their language; you heard it dozens of times a day as people met and passed and departed. Somehow, though, I can't help but think that when Jesus said it, this worn-out phrase sounded brand-new. “Go in peace. Go in *shalom*. Go, healthy; go sound; go, reconciled; go in the moment; go free, not tied up in knots from the past or paralyzed with fears for the future.”

“Your faith has saved you.” Her pluck; her disdain for convention; her outrageous commitment to get what she needed. Her courage to throw away the script and improvise. That's faith.

There's going to be a day, or a dozen days, in your life when you need to be get saved. And on those days, the only thing that will get you over is faith, risk, doing something they did not teach you how to do, and trusting, with various degrees of desperation, that Providence is waiting to catch you after you jump.

And Jesus also says to her, “Your sins are forgiven.”

Just another day's work in the life of our Lord and Savior: taking the big religious show-off down a notch; elevating and unburdening the woman with nothing to lose.

I want to say a word or two about forgiveness.

There is friction in this world. There is friction between married people and between parents and children and among siblings and co-workers and neighbors. And those are the folks we love. There is friction in this blood-thirsty, blood-shedding, blood-feuding world. Our theology even claims that there is cosmic friction, as Creator and creation rub each other the wrong way, and require mediations and rainbows and atonements.

Where is the salve? Where is the release? What gives when the cosmic engine is running a quart low and the parts are rubbing against each other?

Forgiveness is what keeps the world turning. Forgiveness in families; forgiveness in neighborhoods and communities; forgiveness between generations; forgiveness between tribes and clans; forgiveness among nations. If there is no forgiveness, the universe goes bankrupt because there are more debts than can ever be repaid.

In many of the congregations we serve, we like to follow the script, pray the words printed in the bulletin, follow the lectionary, sing all the stanzas, and most of the time we keep all our emotions in their jar.

We should never forget that on any given Sunday, there are people carrying burdens which would take your breath away. Some of these burdens are related to health or grief or the welfare of loved ones. Some are burdens of guilt.

Where's the recovery group, not for those who were abused but for those who were abusive? Where's the recovery group for those who betrayed? for those who allowed someone in their care to suffer harm? for those who broke vows? who compromised ideals? Where's the recovery group for folks who, daily, do hard time, serving what feels like a life sentence? It is here. It is the church. It is the community of people gathering, as an unnamed woman once did, at the feet of Jesus.

There's something powerful at the core of the Jesus movement. There is other powerful medicine in the religions of the world. And I am not going to be parochial and proclaim that my medicine is more potent than another's. I just want to say what it is that is so powerful and attractive in the Jesus movement. The slaver John Newton called it "amazing grace;" the stoner and torturer Saul of Tarsus called it "the free gift of righteousness" (Romans 5:17). It is the liberating realization at the heart of the Christian experience: the urgency of love in the present overwhelms even the terrors of the past. Nothing in the past: no pain, no

shame, no guilt, no burden is as powerful as the possibility for love and kindness and beauty in this moment, as the possibility of helping somebody as we travel along.

Mercy.

Could you use a dose?

But where is the mercy seat? Where do we get this forgiveness? There are several places in a typical service that I might suggest. Some Sunday, you might read the confession of sin, and hear the Parson say something to the effects, “Believe and live,” and it sounds like when Jesus told that woman, “Go in peace.” Believe you are forgiven and come back to life. Something lifts; you feel re-aligned. Out of the Blue, it is Daybreak. Some Sunday, during the Lord’s Prayer, you might hear yourself say, “Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors,” and the words work like an antacid, neutralizing the bile you’ve been storing, and you realize who it is you must forgive because all that anger is hurting you more than the original injury ever did. Some Sunday, following Lord’s Supper, you might receive the peace passed from a sister or brother and feel like you’ve been welcomed back home.

Since, as the Torah says, the LORD abounds in mercy and steadfast love (Exodus 34:6), there is forgiveness seeping out of the pores of the universe, and I would never suggest that the only place you can find a mercy seat is in the church or synagogue of your choice. God knows where you find forgiveness and feel your burdens lifted. Let me make one more observation, about a mercy seat I have found. Whether you need to give some forgiveness or whether you need to receive some forgiveness—and sometimes who cares who’s forgiven or who’s forgiving—all I know is that there is a whole lot of mercy and a whole lot of healing in performing for another, or receiving from another, some little act of physical tenderness. We don’t anoint feet or wash them. Maybe we should, like some of my rural Baptist cousins. How can we can touch each other gently and innocently and give and receive great mercies? The way a woman once washed the dusty feet of a tired man. The way a friend might adjust your collar. The way a mother might remove a splinter. The way my father, who turns 70 this month, did that something that is so vividly etched in my memory. Dad kneeled before his aged mother, removed her shoes, and as tenderly as he could, and as forcefully as it required, performed on her stubs of callused skin and petrified nail a pedicure.