

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when my child will no longer consent to my telling stories about her as sermon illustrations. But today is not that day! A couple of weeks ago, we went through the night-time routine and said goodnight to our toddler, but woke up to find a full-on three-nager living in our house. This overnight transformation has brought some new attitude and sass, along with a few new phrases— one of them being, “That’s not fair”.

Josie claiming that something is not fair typically means she is displeased with the outcome of a transaction— for example, we say that it is time to put away some of the toys we’ve been playing with and she responds, saying that she would prefer to watch another episode of Peppa Pig instead. So, when we find ourselves at a standstill, there are consequences – And when the TV gets turned off, justice for all is in peril. Her concept of fairness is very much still in formation— but it made us realize how early in life we, as humans, begin to cry out in the name of what is fair and what’s not— grappling for what we believe we deserve within those systems that work for us.

Jesus, of course, is all about taking those systems we know and love – and calling everything into question. And most of the time, when we talk about Jesus as a disrupter of systems and structures, we’re talking about hierarchies and the visible disparities between rich and poor, first being last and so on that we see Jesus proclaiming – systems so large and

cumbersome that their reversal gets held in this far-off apocalyptic space, too big for us to understand right now, but that Jesus is slowly revealing to us in the building up of the kingdom of heaven. In today’s text, Jesus starts to poke some holes in those systems we develop almost innately – the question of what is fair and what is not, who is deserving of love and belonging— and how we are called to live into and respond to God’s grace when it makes no sense..

So listen now as we read together from Luke’s gospel, 7, beginning with the 36th verse.

A Sinful Woman Forgiven

36 One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and when he went into the Pharisee’s house he reclined to dine. 37 And a woman in the city who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee’s house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. 38 She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair, kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment. 39 Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, “If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him, that she is a sinner.” 40 Jesus spoke up and said to him, “Simon, I have something to say to you.” “Teacher,” he replied, “speak.” 41 “A certain moneylender had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. 42 When they could not pay, he canceled

the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?" 43 Simon answered, "I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt." And Jesus said to him, "You have judged rightly." 44 Then turning toward the woman, he said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. 45 You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. 46 You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. 47 Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven loves little." 48 Then he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." 49 But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?" 50 But he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

There is a lot going on in this story today – if you are a fan of dramatic tension, you're in luck. If you're a seasoned host or hostess who loves to throw a well-planned and executed soiree, a dinner party like this one probably has you squirming in your seat. It all starts with the encounter between Jesus and this woman, an unexpected guest who slips in the door and engages in lavish and intimate acts of devotion toward him. This woman is not given a name, only the label

of "sinful". Even if she had been on the guest list of this party, her actions might seem strange to us – we typically avoid people's feet when possible these days, especially in a formal or social setting like this one. But she takes on a posture of servanthood, of deep devotion and hospitality – caring for this man named Jesus – and doing so not using a wash basin and towel, because she doesn't have those things. She uses what she has – her tears and her hair, to wash and dry his feet; she kisses them and anoints him with ointment, showing great honor and love.

It's no huge surprise that Simon, the host – a different Simon than Simon Peter, the disciple – is not encouraging of this behavior from an interloper who has not only entered his house, but has engaged in actions he and others deems inappropriate. She's a sinner, she's unclean, and she's excessively and invasively touching his guest. He falls in line with the Pharisaic pattern we've seen so far and will continue to see in these stories, questioning Jesus' authority as he witnesses what is happening – a prophet would know that this woman is too sinful to be here, let alone touching him like that. In our study of Luke's gospel thus far, we have seen Jesus break these barriers already – he has touched and healed the sick, daring to come into contact with the unclean and broken, to heal and to make whole. So it isn't surprising to us that Jesus does not recoil from this stranger on grounds of legality – that he accepts this woman, sin and all, that he receives her expressions of love and hospitality – that's the kind of thing we know that Jesus does.

But Simon is not there yet – he is hung up on the rules and even begins to doubt that Jesus is who he says he is, because he would not let this woman continue touching him like this if he knew who she really was, what she had really done.

Luke portrays this next exchange in such a sharp and clever way – I really can't think of a more powerful way to confront Simon's concerns about Jesus' prophetic ability than for Simon to express that doubt "to himself" – maybe it was an internal monologue or maybe Simon was muttering under his breath – and then have Jesus, the prophet in question, respond directly to him, aloud, "Simon, I have something to say to you". Jesus knows what is really stuck in Simon's craw here – not the question of whether or not Jesus is a prophet, but how it can be that he would welcome this sinful woman into his house – in what world do she and Simon belong in the same room and who is this Jesus that would let this happen?

He offers this parable about the two debtors and with it addresses the elephant in the room – the question of this woman and her worthiness to be present here, with Jesus, expressing her love and adoration for him in this way. Jesus knows that Simon is trying to sort it all out – who belongs where, who is deserving of a place at this table -- he is trying to make the pieces fit. And he's having a hard time seeing how she fits at all. It is, after all, Simon's house and he is the one who invited Jesus – she is the one who has come from the city bringing all her sinfulness with her and ruining his dinner party. In Simon's view – she is less

righteous than he who invited Jesus into his home, and so she is undeniably the one who does not belong.

But Jesus sees this woman for who she is, he accepts her outpouring of love. Jesus sees what the woman has done here in the way of hospitality and what Simon, the host, has failed to do. He sees Simon for who he is, as well – recognizing that Simon is doubting and struggling to sort this out, and so he offers this parable about the two debtors – in which one debtor owes 50 and the other 500 denarii – neither of them can pay off their debts. And the moneylender forgives each of them, releasing them from this contract, wiping their slates clean. Jesus cuts right to the core to ask Simon which debtor would love the forgiving lender more – not which debt was greater, for that is obvious and not of concern to Jesus. The gift of forgiveness is not proportional to the debt owed – both debts, the big and the small, are cleared completely. What Jesus asks Simon is about the two whose debts have been erased and how they will respond.

And suddenly, this is not a story about denarii at all but about grace and gratitude right here and now – in the room where this off-the-rails dinner party is happening. It is a story about the economy of God's love and the unfairness of grace – and it is a story about how we are to respond to something so foolishly generous, to grace so freely given to undeserving sinners like us.

Jesus asks Simon to name the disparities in hospitality shown since he arrived at the party – pointing out how

much more devotion and adoration had been given to him by this random, uninvited woman than Simon, the host—Simon, who has been preoccupied with the self-appointed task of determining who is deserving of Jesus' love, who is deserving of welcome. Simon, has been preoccupied — trying to make it make sense that Jesus would even acknowledge this woman, let alone let her carry on like she has. Simon has been so preoccupied trying to do the math, trying to balance the equation where he comes out as superior — that he has completely missed the opportunity to respond to the grace that has been freely given to him as well. Both debts have been forgiven — the big and the small. Both Simon and this woman are worthy and loved in Jesus' eyes — they are both welcomed in his presence, they are both forgiven and unburdened of the heavy loads they've been lugging around — but only one of them has said thank you. It may be that only one of them even acknowledges a need for forgiveness — it's possible that Simon feels he has no sin at all. Only the woman has given everything she has to Jesus — loving and serving him in an act of deep and powerful gratitude for the absurdly benevolent forgiveness of sin. And it's not this expression of love— her giving everything she had— that earns her Jesus' forgiveness— it's not a balance sheet transaction. It is not until after the parable lesson that Jesus refers to her acts of devotion and says that her “many sins have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love”— framing her extravagance as a grateful response to the forgiveness that Jesus has yet to offer with his words, but has extended in action — by accepting her,

by seeing her for who she is, by receiving her gifts of love. Like this woman, we've been released from our sin before the words of forgiveness are even spoken to us. Everything we do is but a joyful response to what's already been done for us in Christ.

Finally, Jesus speaks to her — a powerful gesture in itself for a man like Jesus to converse with this outcast of a woman — and says, “Your sins are forgiven. Your faith has saved you. Go in peace.” What's translated as “forgiven” is the Greek *apheimi* (a-fee-ay-mee) — a verb that means “to release”. It helps us think of forgiveness as the act of being released from a thing that binds or limits. Jesus tells this woman that her past, whatever it entails, is no longer binding her or holding her back from her future. With his words he offers her this powerful liberation, but even before he says it out loud, his actions and presence with her have said, “I see you, beloved. You matter, beloved, though the world has told you otherwise. Go in peace and know that you have been released from the shackles of sin that have weighed you down — you have been set free to go and love others as you have shown love to me.”

And friends, Christ offers that same message to us — in the love and grace of Christ, we are forgiven, released from the heavy things we've been dragging behind us — set free to love and serve God and one another. That is the good news we proclaim, the hope into which we take those next steps into freedom, claiming our belovedness to go out and transform the world with the nonsensical kind of love

God has given us. Every time we experience the grace of God, we can marvel at how absurd it is – that every time, no matter the size of our sin, no matter the amount of our indebtedness, no matter how deep the hole we have dug for ourselves – God, who is loving and righteous and just, forgives us and washes us clean, puts us back on solid ground, setting us free to go and love as we have been loved, to forgive as we have been forgiven. It doesn't make sense that a small debt and a massive debt are cancelled by the same lender at the same time. It's not fair.

And it's so human of us to need things to be fair because those rules are comfortable to us. We want fair, because it's a game we know how to play. And in that game, we assume we'll do the righteous things that land us in the winners' circles of life. And we can assure ourselves of our place of belonging there when we can look out and point to the ones who clearly don't – the ones who are sinful, the ones who have screwed up way worse than we have. This is a huge hangup for us – and it's what Simon is snagged on – and it's not pretty, but it's deeply ingrained in us. Simon is struggling to try to take the system of righteousness and fairness that he knows so well, a system where the books are balanced – and Jesus is showing him another way.

Because in the kingdom of heaven, the currency is grace and to quote a favorite band of mine, "the beauty of grace is that it makes life not fair." It's not fair that God doles out forgiveness so freely – it's not fair that some of us tried harder

than others to be righteous and good and follow all the rules – but that when it comes time to name how we haven't – how we have tried to follow Jesus and have failed and ask for another shot at it – we're all back on the same level, that we're all set free, released to go in peace and do likewise.

How, like Simon, will we deal with the radical, bad-for-the-bottom line economy of God's grace? In response to God's grace, we are called to love extravagantly and foolishly, in ways that turn heads or disrupt a dinner party – in ways that might cause people to wonder what in the world has gotten into you. In response to God's grace that we can never do enough to earn or sin enough to not earn – we're called to follow Jesus and love God with all we have – to be disrupters of the systems that are so comfortable, the spaces in which we think we can control who belongs – to throw open the doors of our hearts and love this big mess of a world with all our hearts, souls, minds, and strengths – to love our neighbors as ourselves. When we spin our wheels trying to make sense of it, when we get stuck trying to decide how God's love fits into our framework of fairness or determine who is or isn't deserving, we're missing an opportunity to share it with others, to let that light shine through us. All of us have sinned and fallen short of God's glory. And all of us are forgiven, cleansed from unrighteousness and set free for love. And so may we all go forth, in response to that good, nonsensical grace of God – to share God's extravagant love – and may we do it together.