

The Way of Compassion

Luke 7: 36-50

H. Stephen Shoemaker

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I am so grateful, and my congregation is so grateful, to be here today with you at First Baptist Church. And I am so grateful for your wonderful pastor initiating relationship with me and with Grace Baptist Church, your sister church in our neighborhood in Statesville. I look forward to our future “partnership in the gospel”, to use the phrase of the Apostle Paul.

The title of the sermon is “The Way of Compassion.” I could offer a dictionary definition of compassion. Something like, the capacity to *feel with* the suffering of another and the desire to alleviate that suffering. But if you want to *see* compassion, watch Jesus in action!

I am preaching and teaching through Luke’s gospel this season at Grace. Last week I ended the sermon with Jesus’ words: “Be merciful as your Father [in heaven] is merciful”, or “Be compassionate as your Father is compassionate” (Luke 6:36). The Hebrew scripture had as one of its central commands, “Be holy as I, the Lord your God, am holy” (Leviticus 19:2). Jesus deliberately changed the

words to “Be compassionate as your Father is compassionate.” I think what Jesus was saying with these words and with his life was: *It is in compassion that we come closest to the holiness of God.* That is where I ended last week’s sermon, and that is where we begin today—and with this story from Luke 7:36-50.

I

She was on a mission of wholeness, to be herself made whole. Aren’t we all? He was on a mission of wholeness—to make God’s people whole. The Jewish people of Jesus’ day were well-practiced in a certain kind of holiness, but wholeness was a long way off.

Jesus was eating in the house of Simon the Pharisee. Yes, Jesus loves Pharisees too! And wanted wholeness for them. Which is good because we all have a little of the Pharisee-in—us. It is the part of us that lives by rules more than by love, the part that too easily judges others, that can get a little self-righteous. Has anyone ever said to you after you’ve made a mis-step, “How *could* you?!” That’s a Pharisee tone of voice.

Richard Rohr, the Franciscan spiritual writer, says that we human beings have the sad inclination to want to make ourselves “separate and superior”. We divide the world up into “us” and “them”, the righteous and the sinner, the good and the bad. And we of course are on the “righteous” side. We separate ourselves

so we won't be contaminated by those others. But Jesus wasn't afraid of *contamination*; he was into *transformation*, wholeness—for all.

II

As soon as the woman entered the room and saw him, the tears began to fall. Who knows where tears come from and why they fall, but when tears come, the holy is near. Perhaps the tears had come first when she first heard him speak, his words coming like the first day-break, words about the mercy of God flowing as free as the rain from the skies. Freer. And she had felt something like healing start to happen from deep within her.

So that day as she entered the room carrying the alabaster jar of perfumed oil, the tears just fell, there in front of everybody. They spilled from her eyes, down her cheeks, onto his feet. She then let down her hair and dried his feet with her hair, then kissed and kissed them, then anointed them with her perfumed oil.

II

The religious crowd of Jesus' day divided the world up into two groups, the holy and unholy, clean and unclean, pure and impure, righteous and sinner.

On the righteous side were those who kept all 613 commands of God, and who made their sacrifices in the temple. The poor, in contrast, could not afford to

make sacrifices at the temple. The righteous were the well and the wealthy, and health and wealth were considered blessings from God. The righteous lived on the respectable side of town.

On the unrighteous side were the poor, the sick, the lepers, those with physical abnormalities, those of the wrong race, nation, religion or occupation. Do you get what I'm saying? Jews good, Samaritans bad. Men pure, women less pure. Women at their most womanly moments, at childbirth and menstruation, were considered unclean and had to undergo ritual cleansing.

The righteous believed in salvation by moral *perfection*—as they defined perfection. Jesus brought salvation as *wholeness*, and a kind of holiness exemplified by compassion. Just look at his life. He touched the untouchables, healed lepers and Gentiles. He made Samaritans the heroes of his stories. (His opponents accused him of being a closet Samaritan.) He ate and drank with tax-collectors, sinners and prostitutes. And he didn't hold his nose. He befriended them with the divine friendship.

Jesus did not divide the world up into the holy and unholy. Everything is holy, and everyone. He did not build walls, he built bridges. He *was* the bridge.

III

Today's text is Exhibit A in Jesus' program of salvation as wholeness and of his message: It is in compassion that we come closest to the holiness of God.

The woman in the story came from the wrong side of the tracks. By the Pharisees' way of looking at things she is impure in most every way: she is a woman, she is a "woman of the city", which is what it sounds like, a sex-worker. She sold her body for food. But think with me here, how many people sell their souls for money, power and success. Luke describes her as a "sinner", which meant good people did not associate with her.

But here she came into the house of a Pharisee, the most righteous of the righteous. What gave her the courage to enter that house? Had she seen Jesus eat with tax-collectors and sinners? Had she seen his compassion in action? Had she heard him tell the parable of the Good Samaritan who had "compassion" on the Jew lying by the road half-dead? Or, the story of the Prodigal son, where the father ran to meet his prodigal son who had come home from the degradations of the far country and put his arms around him and kissed and kissed him and welcomed him home?" "Could that be me?" she wondered with new-born hope. Had she overheard when a person came to Jesus and called him "Good Teacher", and Jesus replied, "No one is good but God alone," which gave her hope that you didn't have to be perfect to be whole, to be spotless to be saved.

She entered the room, her tears bathing his feet, her hair drying them, then kissing and kissing them, anointed them with her perfume. Simon, the host, the Pharisee had a “fit”, to use an old Southern expression. It was a fit inside his head, but you could *see* it. A gasket was about to blow. He said to himself, “If this man were *really* a prophet, he would know what sort of woman this is who is—O, my good God—*touching* him!”

Jesus read his face, his eyes, his mouth, his jaw, and knew what was going on inside him. He said, “Simon I have a story for you”:

A creditor had two debtors. One owed him 50,000 dollars, the other owed him 5,000 dollars. When they could not repay him, he forgave them both their debts. Which one, Jesus asked, will love him more?

Simon answered quietly, “I suppose the one who was forgiven the greater debt.” “You have answered rightly Jesus said, then drove the point home:

Do you see this woman? I entered your house. You gave me no water to wash my feet, but she has washed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. You gave me no kiss of greeting but she has not ceased kissing my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with her perfume. Her sins, though many, are forgiven, but the one who is forgiven little, loves little.

I bet you could have heard the proverbial pin drop. Then he turned from Simon, whose lamb had probably gotten lodged in his throat, and turned to the woman and said the words which had brought her there, and brought her tears, words which had let down her hair, and kissed his feet and anointed them with her perfume.

“Your sins are forgiven” was what he said, as simple and true as that. Then “Your faith has made you whole. Go in peace”.

If there is any unforgiven part of you, large or small, I hope you will hear now these words of Christ spoken to you today. What is the “faith” that made her whole? Simply this, a heart open to receive his love that goes all the way down and all the way back.

I think there is good news here, too, for the Pharisee, and the Pharisee-in-us. When we divide the world up so severely into the good and bad, the righteous and sinner, we are dividing our *soul* up that way too. There is no wholeness there. There are some disinherited parts of us inside. But when you let God love every part of you, you can be made whole.

V

“Go in peace”, were his last words. She had come seeking wholeness and now experienced the healing and wholeness of Jesus’ compassion. So here’s the

question: Where could she go now and experience a *community* of peace and compassion? A place of welcome and hospitality?

Henri Nouwen has defined spiritual hospitality. It has nothing to do with pot roast, fine china and dusted floors. Hospitality, he said, is the *creation of a safe space where people can be who they are without fear*. Can our hearts be such a place? Our churches? I remember a man in a former church who came forward one Sunday and told the church he was an alcoholic, then said, “Thank you for being a place where I can get well.”

There are so many people in our Statesville community who need such a place, people who feel shut out, rejected. People who by race or disability or poverty “live on the outskirts of hope”. I’m thinking about the poor, the elderly, immigrants, the addicted, the homeless, the under—educated and unemployed. I’m thinking of those who because of their sexual orientation are scorned and ahunned.

Can we be a community of compassion for them, a place to be whole.

And what about Statesville? Can we work to make Statesville a better place for all of its citizens to live? A place of compassion and justice. Let us first “Be the change we wish to see”, then be agents of change for the sake of the gospel in our community.

By “we” I mean, “we” as individuals and I mean “we” as our two churches, Grace and First Baptist, brought together by the Spirit to be God’s people in our side of town, and *for all people* in our city.

I have asked Grace Baptist to ask three questions as we read through each passage in Luke’s gospel:

1) Who am I in this story?

2) What is God calling me to be and to do?

And 3) Who is my neighbor, the one God is calling me to love as I love myself, as I have myself been loved by God.

What think ye?