

Our text this morning is going to come from Luke chapter 7, starting at verse 33, if you'd like to turn there in your bible.

I used to get into this argument with a friend of mine all the time, usually in front of others. He'd bait me and ask, "Can a humble person know that they are humble?" I'd say no, once you are aware of your humility, pride creeps in and humility is gone. And he would then ask, well then how could Moses write that he was the most humble man that ever lived (Numbers 12:3)? I'll let you ponder that one for a bit.

Humility is an elusive thing — (to steal an illustration) it a bit like trying to stab a tomato seed with a fork. And it's divergent, pride, well pride is a deceptive thing. When you combine an elusive virtue, with a deceptive vice — one quickly understands how we human beings, bamboozle ourselves — some have referred to it as the fine art of self-deception.

Pride, the elusive nature of humility, the art of self-deception — we see all of it in the narrative and parable we are going to cover this morning. One of the things I hope we observe is how Jesus wants to cut through the deception of pride in order to help this Pharisee named Simon realize his need for mercy and forgiveness. The brief parable Jesus speaks in the middle of our narrative is meant to undermine this mans pride and to humble him, and move him to repentance and forgiveness.

But Simon, the Pharisee doesn't stand in isolation, we are meant to see ourselves in him.

Read Luke 7:33-50^[1]_[SEP]

Our text this morning begins with the closing of the previous pericope — often we open our Bibles and subconsciously we break down the passages by the little headings that appear, mine says, "Jesus Anointed by a Sinful Woman" and we dislodge the text we are reading, from the previous narrative — but we're not supposed to do that, in fact we may be modestly misled by doing that — for example, the sub-heading I read, "Jesus Anointed by a Sinful Woman" leads us to think this narrative is mostly about the sinful woman, it's not. The character we are supposed to check ourselves against is Simon. There are several reasons why I say that, here's the first — in verses 33 and 34 Jesus contrasts himself with John the Baptist — He says that John didn't eat or drink and you say he has a demon, The Son of Man (aka Jesus) comes eating and drinking and they say he's a glutton, a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners. In other words, Jesus is accused of eating and drinking with sinners, and in the very next scene, he's eating and drinking with a Pharisee — which should lead us to ask the question, "Is the Pharisee a sinner?"

And that's the question that should be in the back of our mind as we read that Jesus is invited to have dinner with a Pharisee, and is reclining at the table. Is the Pharisee a sinner? I guess we will find out.

Then the focus of the narrative shifts — we are told that a woman who had lived a sinful life learned that Jesus was at the Pharisees house, and she comes with an alabaster jar of perfume. And she weeps at Jesus feet, wiping them with her hair, kissing them and pouring perfume upon them.

There are many complexities to Jesus' interaction with this woman — here is what I believe is important to take away from it:

The scene is emotional and the tears with which she washes Jesus' feet, are tears of remorse. She is crying because she has been brought low, humbled, broken by her sin. And for healing she comes to the one through whom she may receive forgiveness. And if we catch it right, one of the most moving things about the interaction is that in the humbling shame of confronting her sin, she knows she is safe with Jesus — she knows that with Jesus she will not be betrayed.

It's one of the biggest hurdles in this life — part of what prevents us from confronting, confessing or relinquishing our own sin the betrayal of others. What if I trust someone, and they leverage my weaknesses against me, think less of me, shame me and humiliate and betray me — and to our own shame, it is unfortunate that the church is known for doing that, she is safe with Jesus.

The second thing we should understand about this woman's actions are that they are an act of worship, and therefore an act of love. We are going to come back to this in a few moments, but it's important to notice that this is how Jesus sees her actions, they are an act of worship and love.

At verse 39 we hear what the Pharisee who invited Jesus is thinking: Luke writes that the Pharisee, "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.'"

The Pharisees' argument is basically this:

If he's a prophet — he'd know this woman was a sinner and by implication, he wouldn't allow her to touch him.

Jesus is allowing her to touch him — therefore, he must not be a prophet.

What doesn't seem to cross his mind is that Jesus does know what kind of woman she is, and is willing to extend her grace and mercy. That he IS a prophet, and even more than a prophet, and willing to receive her act of love because of her faith, and set her free from the bondage of sin in which she is entangled, that she might go in peace. Those thoughts don't cross this Pharisee's mind.

In other words, this Pharisee is so pridefully locked into his theological categories that he has no place for grace, mercy and forgiveness — thus has no place for God. So religious that we have no place God — making a religion out of religion. Let me put it another way, it would seem that this man believes that there are some who are beyond God's grace, beyond God's ability to forgive, or at least there are some who are undeserving.

I say this repeatedly, but I say it repeatedly because it's important — the first time God describes his character in scripture he says this: "The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow

to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin...

Yes he goes on to say that:

“he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation.” Exodus 34:6–7 NIV11

But the first word is compassion and grace, love, faithfulness and forgiveness... yes there is a time for judgment and justice, but the first action should always look like compassion and grace. It is this way with God, as it should be with his people.

Having said that, here is what else it reveals about this Pharisee’s theological practice, it’s sinful. Not simply misguided, but sinful — actually opposed to the purposes of God. You see, his practice is to judge first, to condemn first, to withdraw first, to withhold *first* — whereas God’s is to be compassionate first, to be gracious first, to be patient first, to be loving first, to be committed first, to be forgiving first (and I realize I just put a bunch of things first, but they are of one package).

It might be surprising to hear this but Jonathan Edwards — quite possibly the greatest theologian in American history; author of the sermon, Sinners in the hands of an angry God; kept a book of personal resolutions — and in it he wrote these words, “Resolved, to remember my sin, and not despise anyone because of theirs.” It would be good for all of us to make the same resolution, To remember MY OWN SIN, AND NOT DESPISE ANYONE BECAUSE OF THEIRS.

This is where the Pharisee falls short. He either doesn’t believe he has sin, or does not believe he is in need of forgiveness, or believes his sin just isn’t that bad. Thus, he can look down on others: it’s pride, and self-deception.

Back to our text, in verse 39 this Pharisee questions Jesus reputation as a prophet, for if he were a prophet, he’d know what kind of woman was touching him. Jesus then turns to him (verse 40) and says, “Simon, I have something to tell you.” Simon responds, “Tell me, teacher.” And Jesus tells him a parable, addressing the situation.

Two brief side notes — Up until verse 40 both the woman, and the Pharisee are anonymous, we don’t know their names. The woman remains that way. However, and this is the second reason we are meant to see ourselves within the character of the Pharisee, in verse 40 Jesus calls him by name, Simon, and by telling us his name, we are drawn into the tension of HIS narrative. As we read this we are meant to be asking ourselves, “Does my attitude, look the same as Simon’s?”

Additionally, in addressing Simon with this parable, Jesus is showing himself to be a prophet, one who knows Simons thoughts and heart, and as we will eventually see, he’s more than a prophet, for he forgives sin.

Simon, Jesus says, I have something to tell you. Tell me, teacher, Simon says. And we hear the parable — verse 41:

“Two people owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he forgave the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?”

Simon replied, “I suppose the one who had the bigger debt forgiven.”
“You have judged correctly,” Jesus said.

Let’s just briefly pull together a couple threads — within the parable, Jesus is uniting love and forgiveness, more nuanced, he ties love as a response to forgiveness. (verse 42, the man forgives the debt and Jesus asks, which one will love him more?) Love is an appropriate response to forgiveness. Now let’s widen our view, by chapter 7 in this gospel, Luke has already established a link between repentance and forgiveness. Forgiveness does not sit apart from repentance. Connected to that is that repentance always requires humility. When we get to this scene, we see that love is an appropriate response to forgiveness. Forgiveness doesn’t exist apart from repentance; repentance requires humility; Love is an appropriate response to forgiveness.

What follows in Jesus conversation with Simon is a list of what he didn’t do, and what this woman did do (v. 44). Simon offered no water for the feet, she wet his feet with her tears, wiping them with her hair; Simon offered no welcoming kiss, she has not stopped kissing his feet; Simon gave no oil for his head, but she poured perfume on his feet.

Did you notice how many times the word feet appeared — this woman has humbled herself before Jesus, that is the picture painted as this woman weeps, wipes, kisses and anoints Jesus feet, because she is at his feet. Simon is not.

Even more, by pointing out what Simon didn’t provide, in contrast to what she did — we observe that she’s taken over the responsibilities of the host. Now observe in verse 47 how Jesus interprets her actions: “her many sins have been forgiven — as her great love has shown.” By the way, this is the second time that Jesus shows himself to be a prophet — this time based upon the criteria Simon was looking for — but I digress — end of verse 47, “But whoever has been forgiven little loves little.”

I think it’s obvious, but I’m going to say it anyway — this isn’t meant to be a competition, I’ll go out and sin more, so that I can be forgiven more, and thus love Jesus more. That’s not what he’s saying. Jesus comment of “whoever has been forgiven little loves little” is a pointed remark aimed at Simon’s supercilious attitude. If her actions, the tears, the cleaning and kissing and anointing of Jesus feet are a revelation of love, because she’s been forgiven; Simon’s actions are NO-THING, no water, no kiss, no oil, revealing no love, and the point is that he is unrepentant and unforgiven.

The woman leaves forgiven of her sins, not because of her acts of love, but because of her faith, verse 50 — formally, Simon is silent at the end of this, we don’t know the end of it because his story is to become our story. All we hear are other guests asking, “Who is this who even forgives sins?” as Jesus reveals himself as more than a prophet, for he forgives sins — his declaration to the woman that her faith has saved her, followed by the benediction to go in peace.

Embracing forgiveness means we are trusting in God's mercy, AND NOT TRUSTING IN OUR OWN GOODNESS. And honestly that's hard — sometimes we have a hard time seeing our own sin, on the whole we basically think of ourselves as good people — it's a subtle form of pride. I'm not as bad as them; okay, but are you as good as Jesus?