

Letting Your Hair Down
A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church
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Luke 7:36 – 8:3
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“Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy!” These are perhaps the most famous words of Luke’s gospel – the angel’s announcement to a bunch of mangy shepherds in a field that a special child was born in Bethlehem. Verlee Copeland reminds us that too often we forget the reach and length of these words. The good tidings proclaimed on a cold winter’s night in Bethlehem resonate throughout Luke’s gospel. It’s not just that a child was born; it’s that this child changed the world.

Today’s lection demonstrates the topsy-turvy nature of the kingdom Luke’s gospel proclaims: God’s realm will not be bound to privilege or social norms.

Imagine the scene:

As the sun sets on a sleepy little town in Israel, Simon, a well-respected and prosperous member of the community, is throwing a banquet. His servants scurry around: tables to be set, seats to be assigned, fine dishes to be completed, banquet-scapes to be finalized. This party will be the ultimate demonstration of hospitality and luxury.

Simon is not only prosperous, but he’s also a righteous man, a Pharisee who takes great lengths in following Torah. And he’s been impressed with Jesus’ teachings. So impressed, he invites Jesus to attend his banquet as an honored guest.

Simon's villa is full of people. But it's not just party guests who attend his banquet. One way that patrons offered charity to the community was to allow peasants to gather in the courtyard of their homes – these folks would receive the leftovers.

Among this crowd of commoners is an unnamed woman. And she's been branded a sinner. We're never told what her sin is, though tradition has been rather lazy, and rather uncreative, and has labeled her a promiscuous woman. The truth is, something has happened in her past that has given her a social stigma. She's been marginalized, shamed, shut off from the in-crowd. Who knows how long it's been, but I suspect it's been a while. And with every passing day her shame grows heavier. It's like a book bag collecting rocks, each little load weighing her shoulders down, draining the life and energy and self-esteem from her body. To the banquet guests, this woman is an afterthought – she is beneath them.

But this woman has a purpose. She knows that Jesus will be dining here tonight. And she knows he has the power to offer her a remarkable kind of grace. Perhaps she's seen him around. Perhaps she's heard about his ability to offer healing to the least and the left out. Whatever the case may be, this woman is willing to take bold action. She puts her trust in something bigger than herself.

Upon seeing Jesus, she falls at his feet. And with all of herself, she celebrates the presence of Jesus in her midst. She's so overcome with emotion that she begins crying, and with her tears, she washes his dusty feet. And having removed the dirt, she lets down her hair, and dries Jesus' feet with her hair. And then she takes a jar of precious alabaster, and anoints his feet.

Think about that for a minute – In a rocky, dusty, arid climate, where one walks in sandals all day – would there be anything more soothing and more welcoming, than a bath and balm to heal callused feet? And when she’s done, she kisses Jesus’ feet continuously, emphasizing her devotion to him.

Luke quickly reminds us that this is still Caesar’s world. And it’s quite obvious that Simon still lives in it.

Simon, knowing the background of this woman, and judging her to be inferior, is perplexed that Jesus, a man he deemed to be so special, perhaps even a prophet, would allow such a woman to touch him.

“I must have misjudged him,” Simon thinks to himself. “This man cannot be a prophet. Prophets know better than to associate with sinners.”

Jesus, intuiting Simon’s thoughts, and in response, he tells a parable about the forgiveness of two great debts. A creditor forgives one debtor two months’ wages, and the other two years’ wages.

“Whom did the creditor love more,” Jesus asks.

“The one with the larger debt,” Simon says, “because he had more to be forgiven.”

Jesus responds, “You have judged rightly.”

And turning to the woman, Jesus says:

Simon, do you see this person? She's shown me love and welcome. I'm supposed to be your guest, and yet you have offered me no bath for my feet, no kiss to welcome me, no oil to anoint my head. And yet this woman, the one you deem to be a sinner, well she's shown me nothing but hospitality – she has washed my feet, she's anointed them, and she hasn't stopped kissing me, or showing her affection since the moment I got here.

Yes, she's got a past. She has sinned. But in my presence, she realizes that she can lay down that burden. She realizes that she doesn't need to be afraid, or scared, or worried, or invisible. She realizes that she can simply be a child of God. And in response, she has shown great love.

But on the other hand, there are those that deem themselves righteous. They've sinned a little less. Perhaps their privilege or other circumstances have protected them in a way that others weren't. But these folks, those who have sinned little, they also tend to think they need a little less of what the world has to offer, and so they also love a little less.

And then he turned to the woman, and said, "Your sins are forgiven."

And a quick aside. Luke doesn't give us much detail here. But don't you imagine this was a cool moment? Don't you imagine Jesus spoke to this woman in a way that was so intimate, and so personal, as to transform her entire being? And even though Luke didn't mention her name, don't you imagine Jesus made sure to ask her name, to acknowledge her worth and dignity, and to let her hear it called aloud in the presence of God? And can you imagine the light that must have shone in her eyes?

But once again, Luke reminds us we're still in Caesar's world. The dinner guests, despite being witnesses to this poignant scene, remark to one another, "Who is this who even forgives sins?"

Jesus ignores their skepticism. And he tells this remarkable woman: "Your faith has saved you; Go in peace!"

And I can't help but think how loose her shoulders must have felt, and the little bounce that must have been in her step as she turned and walked away. Too many years she had hung her head in shame. But no more! This day, don't you imagine, she walked a little taller?

We're left to wonder about the other dinner guests. As the years passed on, did they still cling to the privilege of Caesar's world – still craving title and wealth and righteousness and other tokens to make them appear a little less sinful, a little less marginalized? Or did this dinner bring them an appetite for love and hospitality, and an eagerness to display such love and hospitality outside of societal realms?

Luke's gospel reminds us again and again, that God's kingdom will not adhere to societal expectations. Time after time, the first and the most, the rich and the righteous, the stable and the powerful all fail to exhibit a recognition of God's presence in Jesus, and a basic understanding of how God's love will be made manifest here on earth. And time after time, unlikely characters: Centurions, nameless women, persons suffering from mental illness or leprosy, sinners and tax collectors – each of these recognize the power of Jesus to transform their lives. And in such recognition, they act boldly, confidently, and generously to make their love known.

I think this is the challenge of today's lection: Whoever we are, wherever we are, whenever we are, we sit at banquet. It may not always look like Simon's house, but in every setting: dinner table, classroom, sanctuary, workplace, shopping mall, sidewalk, courthouse, hospital room, you name it, there are systems and customs in place, and statuses to be granted. And here's the question? What kind of radical, audacious, bold, even unnerving acts of hospitality, are we willing to offer to make the love of God apparent to others?

When a marginalized woman pours out her whole self, pours out all of her affection in recognition of God's presence, and throws a little excitement into an otherwise boring get-together, will you slap your white linen napkin on your lap in disgust, and push your seat away from the table? Or will you drink in this example, and proclaim, "Amen, sister! It's about time somebody let their hair down!!!"

Long ago, the angels proclaimed good tidings of great news: God gave us a gift of extravagant love in the form of Jesus. And in response to such a gift, women and men of all shapes and sizes responded with the same extravagant love for one another. And here's more good news: We can too, whenever and wherever we finally decide to let our hair down.

May it be so! And may it be soon! Amen.