

Open Invitations

Luke 7:36-50

As we continue with this extended time in the Gospel of Luke, we should be reminded that the Scripture we are studying is not some abstract collection of short stories. The Word of God is intended to be personal – as meaningful for each of us as it was for those who experienced these events firsthand and as meaningful for each of us as the Word has been for the generations of Christians who have been learning from these pages ever since.

Like all of Scripture, we are invited to find a place for ourselves in this passage. I hope you will hear that invitation this morning not just in general way, but personally.

READ Luke 7:36-50

A very similar event is found in all the other Gospels, but there is enough difference in the details to cast doubt that Luke is telling the same story as the others. The place is different, the time seems to be different, the name of the host is not quite the same, and Luke does not give us the reaction of Judas, who John tells us objected to the waste of the expensive perfume. We'll take this as a separate event.

Jesus has been invited here to the house of a Pharisee named Simon for dinner. We are not sure what motivated Simon to offer this invitation. We don't know if he was one of those Pharisees that were opposing Jesus, if he was gathering intelligence, or was honestly curious about the teachings of Jesus. There is an odd sort of tension here, as Simon indicates his respect for Jesus when addresses Him as "Teacher" or "Rabbi" in verse 40, but he had not offered Jesus the common hospitality of a warm greeting, cool water for His dusty feet, or a touch of fragrant oil. We do not know who the other guests were for this meal, though it would have been expected that when a noted teacher was in town, people would have generally have been welcomed into the house to hear what he had to say, even people like the woman we read of here. Luke doesn't give her a name, but it is awkward to keep saying "the woman", so let's call her Sarah.

We don't really know what Sarah had done to gain the designation of having lived a sinful life. Some commentators, like Barclay, assume that she was a prostitute. Luke

does not name her sin but helps us understand that both she and the people who knew her considered her sin to be great. Jesus knows Simon's reaction to the presence of this woman, to the immodesty of letting her hair down, to the extravagance of her pouring perfume on Jesus' feet.

We can insert ourselves into the story and examine our own reaction. What if we were in the place of one of the other guests, not the host, but people who knew Sarah, knew of her life? Would we have objected to her presence? Would we have wanted to keep her away from Jesus? What if we were in the place of the host, Simon? Would we have tried to keep Sarah out?

We can learn something important about Simon here. He did not try to exclude Sarah, no matter what he thought of her, and when Jesus called his name and said "I have something to tell you", Simon listened. We see at least a hint of openness here in this Pharisee – a group of people that we have come to think of as rigid and close-minded. More important than what we learn about Simon, though, is what we learn about Jesus: Jesus had not given up on Simon. Whatever Simon's motivation in inviting Jesus to this dinner, whatever Simon's reaction to Sarah's presence, whatever Simon's predisposition to the teachings of Jesus... Jesus had not given up on him.

We don't know what came first in Sarah, her impulse to make herself so completely vulnerable in front of Simon and his guests or her understanding of the forgiveness that she had been offered and received. Luke does not give us that background, and we do not know where she may have encountered Jesus before. But we know her reaction to forgiveness, and it is the reaction that we should all have: complete surrender to the love and grace of God that is the source of all forgiveness and mercy. Jesus affirms Sarah's forgiveness, not because of the extravagant perfume, but because of her humility. We connect her example to the fundamentals of salvation that Paul describes at Romans 10:9: "That if you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." Confessing – claiming and proclaiming that Jesus is Lord – is both an action and a way of life. It incorporates our acknowledgement of who we are – sinners in need of forgiveness –

and who God is – the only source of that forgiveness that we are so desperate for. In that confession, we are convicted and claim our pardon, and surrender ourselves to the Lordship of God in all that we are. Sarah was right there, claiming her forgiveness. Sarah was right there, living out a faith in which she boldly told the world, “Here is the source of my forgiveness and the salvation of my soul.”

We are left to speculate about Simon and his response to this event. Barclay says “...the greatest of sins is to be conscious of no sin; but a sense of need will open the door to the forgiveness of God...” The person who does not acknowledge sin and the need for forgiveness will never experience the freedom from the burden of sin that forgiveness brings. The closer we draw to God, the more clearly we understand that we are not Him and the more clearly we understand our need for God’s forgiveness to restore us to right relationship with Him. But as long as we believe we are good enough, that we are making it just fine on our own, we will be defined by our basic sinful, self-centered human natures and we will never experience God’s mercy and grace. We exclude ourselves from salvation and condemn ourselves to sin and death if we refuse to admit and claim our need for God.

Did Simon get it? Luke does not tell us, but in showing us that Jesus had not given up on Simon the Pharisee, Luke tells the story of the hope that we still have by the grace of God. Jesus took Simon by the hand and led him to a place where he could see – if he would look – the revealed extravagance of God’s grace and its universal reach through the example of Sarah. God leads us there, too, all the time, and invites us to see – to see the reality of His grace revealed, the freedom of His forgiveness, and the salvation of our souls. Won’t you take God’s hand and hear Him say to you what He said to Sarah: “Your sins are forgiven. Your faith has saved you. Go in peace.”

Amen