

“Faith Poured Out”  
Smyrna United Church of Christ  
June 13, 2010  
Sermon by Katherine Raley

**Luke 7:36-8:3**

7:36 One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and took his place at the table. 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. Then she continued 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 creditor 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 sins, which were many, 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 And he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

8:1 Soon afterwards he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, 2 as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, 3 and Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their resources.

Have you ever been at an event where something unexpected happened? Doesn't even have to be an event, just doing *something* in which you think you know what to expect, but then all of a sudden things change. Sometimes it's a bad change - you might be driving and get a flat tire, or it starts raining when you were starting an outdoors event, or an uninvited guest crashes a dinner party. Sometimes, though, it can be a great surprise - a letter might come in the mail with great news, or someone presents an unexpected gift, or...an unexpected guest shows up at a dinner

party. In the story that Carly just read, something unexpected happens at a Pharisee's dinner party. For the Pharisee, I think, it was an unwelcome event; for Jesus, though, I think it was one of those exciting changes - an unexpected gift that the woman gave him. This unexpected change has many different perspectives to it. Much of the story depends on the hearer's place in it.

With that in mind, I want to tell the story again.

A man named Simon is holding a dinner party, a banquet. He is a Pharisee, a Jewish leader and keeper of the Jewish law. From other stories in Luke and the other gospels, we know that Jesus and the Pharisees don't really get along. A few verses earlier, Luke 7:30, the narrator says that the Pharisees and lawyers rejected God's purpose for themselves because they had refused John the Baptist's baptism. Simon invites Jesus to his home, though, maybe wanting to see what this man who people are calling a prophet is all about. Jesus comes in, and in the Roman style of the day takes his place *reclining* at the table, his head at the table, lifted up on his elbow, and his feet laid out behind him. The food is brought out, and all the guests begin to eat.

The woman enters in, probably scared, but acting with defiance, head held high? Looking down so that she doesn't meet anyone's eyes and lose her nerve? Smiling, looking only at Jesus?

Overwhelmed with so much love that her eyes are beginning to fill and overflow, and when she gets to Jesus' feet amidst all the other guests she kneels down and touches them, as the closest thing that she can reach, clasping them in her hands and kneeling over them, then notices her tears mingling with the dust on his feet, dust gathered there from traversing Galilee, and she begins to wipe off her tears with her hair, cleaning his feet at the same time. As she wipes and cleans them she cannot help but kiss them as well, her love is overflowing. Maybe she had meant to give him the jar of ointment she's carrying, or pour it on his head, or maybe it was meant for

this purpose all along. Whatever it was for originally, she now pours it over his feet, anointing them with oil and wiping them with her hair .

What is Jesus doing this whole time? We do not know if we have the full account in this story, but what we do have shows Jesus calmly accepting the woman's attention, and then speaking to Simon. Perhaps, when she knelt down at his feet, clasping them and kissing them and wetting them with her tears, he turned from his reclining position to look to see what was happening. Maybe then he recognized her, and knew that she was showing her thanks and love. Maybe then he looked around the room to see if others had noticed, and sees Simon, his host, staring at her and Jesus in shock. Or maybe he does not take his eyes off of her, but merely starts speaking to Simon, slowly turning his head away, as if reluctant to give Simon his attention.

And, not surprisingly, he uses this time to talk to Simon, and the rest of the guests, and to tell a story, a parable, that relates this situation to something related to God. Two people in debt cannot pay the creditor – one owes a much smaller amount than the other. The creditor cancels the debt of both of them. Jesus' point? The woman who is anointing Jesus' feet does indeed have much sin, and Simon the righteous Pharisee appears to have little. Both of them, though, are forgiven by God and by Jesus. The woman's response is great love, because she recognizes that she has been forgiven much. Simon's, though, is weaker, because he does not recognize the magnitude of what he has been forgiven. He did not show Jesus all the signs of generous hospitality that would be shown a highly loved and respected leader and friend. He did not do anything particularly wrong, but he did not show his love. Jesus points this out to him, saying "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. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with

ointment.” Jesus points out to Simon his oversights as a host. He embarrasses him in front of his guest. Instead he lifts up the woman, tells her that her faith has made her well, and to go in peace.

The woman had given Jesus a gift of her faith, and he had received it as one. The Pharisee, on the other hand, had only seen the interruption of his dinner party by an unwelcome guest, a sinner who he looked down on.

Who are *we* in the story? Are we the woman, coming to give Jesus an unexpected gift, pouring out our faith into his receiving and into those around him? Are we Jesus, receiving the gifts of others with openness and our own faith? Or are we the Pharisee, not able to see past our own discomfort, past our judgments and prejudices, to the faith and love that are being poured out at our very table, at our own hosted event?

**I think that we have been all three, and are the Pharisee more often than we might want to admit. There are some unexpected changes that we don't want to accept, and prejudices that we can't seem to see past. Sometimes we think we know all about another person, and why they are or are not worthy to receive the blessing and attention of Christ. We judge them by how they look, or by one or two interactions with them, or even by their long-held reputation.** The woman in our story was known in the community as a sinner. We don't know what kind of sinner exactly, but knowing that this Pharisee, a Jewish leader, doesn't accept her as worthy to touch a prophet is enough. She is unclean in Jewish law and custom. If Jesus is the prophet everyone thinks he is, he would not let her defile him.

There are two things wrong with that. First, Jesus is *not* the prophet that everyone thinks he is. He is the Messiah, yes, but he is a prophet and a savior who has reversed the roles, associating

with sinners, outcasts of society, and social elites alike. He has come to save all, and love of God and love of neighbor are the rules to live by in the new kingdom rather than clean and unclean, sinner and righteous. So, Simon the Pharisee is wrong about Jesus' role, and secondly, he is also wrong about the woman's role. The woman is not the defilement that Simon the Pharisee thinks she is. In Jesus' eyes, she is not a sinner – she is a person pouring out herself through her faith to Jesus whose sins have been forgiven. **When we are tempted to act like the Pharisee in this story, and are too focused on the negative judgments we have of other people, Jesus reminds us here to look past all that, and see the gifts that the other is pouring out, and the fact that sins are not to be judged, but forgiven.**

So, sometimes we take the Pharisee's role, and have to be reminded to look past our judgment to God's forgiveness and faith poured out. This story also teaches us, though, to try to take the woman's perspective in the story. The woman poured herself out to Christ. It was not just a material gift that she gave, though she did use the material means she had available in the ointment that she used on Jesus' feet. The Pharisee gave material things, too, with the dinner laid out before Jesus. The woman goes past the material, though, and puts herself into her gift.

She pours out her courage to come in where she has not been invited. She pours out her tears in relief, in thankfulness, in love. She pours out her kisses that show her overwhelming love and gratitude. She pours out her ointment on Jesus' feet, a loving gift to anoint the anointed one, the Messiah. More than anything, though, she pours out her faith. Faith in Jesus, faith in God, that she has been forgiven by God's love. She recognizes that the forgiveness requires a personal investment in showing thanks, love, and faith.

How do we put ourselves into our gratitude? How do we pour out our Faith? Do we invest personally, like the woman? It doesn't have to be tears and kisses – there are other ways of showing faith and gratitude. To pour out our faith in today's world, we have to respond to the world not as the Pharisee, but as Jesus. Pouring out our faith means receiving the gifts that others have without judging them, and centering those gifts on God. Sometimes it means being courageous and going where we are not comfortable. It means thanking God in our prayer and in our daily actions. It means being hospitable to others, not in a formal way, but in an enthusiastic loving way. The Pharisee welcomed Jesus into his home and at his table, but the woman went above and beyond that and gave to Jesus all the extra attention that Simon did not.

In the last three verses that Carly read, we separate from the story of the woman and Simon, and see a bigger version of other women pouring out their faith. We are told of three specific women, Mary Magdelene, Joanna, and Susanna, all who were healed by Jesus, and all who are responding in faith by following him. Others join Jesus too who have been healed, and want to give back in the ways that they can. Some leave everything and follow, and some support the disciples with the resources they have available. All are living by faith and gratitude.

How will you pour out your Faith? Will you recognize yourself in the coming week as Simon the Pharisee more, or the woman pouring herself out to Jesus in gratitude more? Will you give only what is required, or will you give of yourself in utmost gratitude and faith? Will you receive the gifts of others wholeheartedly, and give wholeheartedly in return? We strive to be like the woman and like Jesus, and are reminded to change our perspective when we are acting more like Simon. At all times, though, we know that we are forgiven and loved, no matter what.

Amen.