

Pentecost 4, Proper 6, Yr C
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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.

How many of you are familiar with this gospel story? Do you know that it is a story that appears in all four of the Gospels? Three of them are located in the story of Jesus close to the time of his crucifixion - a story that we usually hear at the end of Lent or during Holy Week. And in each of those three versions, the point of the story is the expense of the ointment, and why didn't the money for that get used for the poor instead. And Jesus says the poor will always be with them but they will not always have Jesus with them.

But Luke's story is different. It comes early on in the Jesus narrative. It is not about using money for the ointment instead of the poor nor is it about the death of Jesus; it is instead about hospitality and forgiveness.

How many of you know the name of the woman with the alabaster jar of ointment? Any guesses? If you are thinking Mary (just plain Mary) then you are remembering the story from the Gospel of John. Mary is the sister of Martha and Lazarus. Were any of you thinking her name is Mary Magdalene? Yes? So, I'm guessing that you also have an idea in your head about what sort of sinner she was, right? Let's call her a woman of the street, OK?

Well, guess what? In as many times as I have heard or read this lesson, I have always thought the woman was described as a woman of the street. But in the other three Gospels, she is not called anything at all, not a sinner, not a harlot, not a prostitute - nothing. She is 'just' a woman. And in Luke's gospel, the Greek word is 'sinner', the King James Version is 'sinner', even the New Revised Standard Version is 'sinner'. So where did we get the idea that this woman - who is unnamed in 3 versions - and is called a sinner in only 1 version - is a harlot named Mary Magdalene?

I can't answer that question for certain. But centuries-old writings by some of the church Fathers (as they were called) describe her as lewd, as a fornicator, as other words you probably don't want me to say here. I guess because she had long

hair, perfumed oil and kissed Jesus' feet - and she was a 'sinner', what else could they think? No wonder the Church has had so much trouble over women...and sex... for all these hundreds of years!

But there's another possibility with this woman that I have never considered until I read a blog by a hospice pastor and author. She suggests that women may have let down their hair to be sexually attractive, but they also let it down if they were in mourning or grieving, or out of shame. Her actions would have been sensual (literally having to do with the senses) if she had been kissing the feet of her baby or preparing a body for burial. She was weeping, after all.

(http://theolog.org/2007/06/blogging-toward-sunday_11.html, Debbie Blue)

This woman might have been old. Her hair might have been long...and gray. She might have had "crooked teeth, brow teeth, missing teeth, wrinkled skin, eyes filmed over with cataracts." She might not have been sexy or loose. She might have been frantically grieving or even incredibly grateful. Whatever made her a 'sinner' might not have had anything to do with sex; she might have been like Jezebel: mean and devious and cruel. But it's not an either/or. We have many things that make us sinful women...or men.

So let's move on to Simon, the Pharisee and Jesus' dinner host. He, like most of the Pharisees, is devoted to doing the right thing according to the Jewish law. He's probably a nice guy most of the time. But he's curious about Jesus and that's why he invited him to eat dinner. So when the woman shows up with the ointment, Simon - no matter what her particular sin - is offended by her presence, and he wants to send her away. But Jesus sides with the woman, and here is where we get to the heart of the matter.

Jesus tells Simon the story of 2 debtors and a merciful creditor. The object of the lesson is that the debtor who owed more money was more grateful than the debtor who only owed a little. Simon, who apparently doesn't see himself as one who needs much, if any, forgiveness, also doesn't see the need to return much love. But the woman, well aware of her sins, is so grateful that she offers extravagant love to the one who forgives her - Jesus.

That love is exhibited through the acts of hospitality - or in Simon's case - the lack of acts of hospitality. Simon turns out to be all about himself. He wants to know about Jesus. He wants to be able to tell other Pharisees what he has found out. He

is not interested in what Jesus has to say in order to understand who Jesus is. So he does not even offer Jesus water with which to wash his feet -- the very basic kind of hospitality -- when Jesus arrives at his house.

But our unknown woman goes way beyond offering the basics. She is so aware of what has been done for her - forgiving her of all her sins - that she weeps with the gratitude that overwhelms her. Jesus sees her and knows her in his heart. And his forgiveness is grace-ful, unconditional, and full of love.

It's the same for all of us. There are no conditions we have to meet in order to be forgiven. It doesn't matter how many sins we have or how severe they are. That's hard for us to believe, but it is basic to our faith. Jesus does for us what we cannot do for ourselves, and so we find ourselves here in this place, to sing, to pray, to read, to listen, to try to do good, not because we hope it will earn points for us with God, but because everything has already been given to us. All we have to do is be open to receiving the gift.

Kinda makes you want to let your hair down and weep and kiss someone's feet, doesn't it?