

Recently, I spoke with a young man who told me that all he knew about Christianity was the Christmas story and the Easter story—Jesus’ birth, death and resurrection—but nothing in between. “I’ve always wondered if there was more to it!” he said.

Indeed, Jesus’ work between Christmas and Easter is rich. The stories in the Gospels help us to connect these great events of our faith. For in them we see our Savior’s heart. This morning I want to talk about Christ’s heart for us as we see it illustrated in St. Luke’s Gospel.

OPENING PRAYER

READ Luke 7:36-50

One of the Pharisees asked (Jesus) to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table. 37 And behold, a woman of the city, who was a sinner, when she learned that he was reclining at table in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster flask of ointment, 38 and standing behind him at his feet, weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears and wiped them with the hair of her head and kissed his feet and anointed them with the ointment. 39 Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner." 40 And Jesus answering said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." And he answered, "Say it, Teacher." 41 "A certain moneylender had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. 42 When they could not pay, he cancelled the debt of both. Now which of them will love him more?" 43 Simon answered, "The one, I suppose, for whom he cancelled the larger debt." And he 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 wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. 45 You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss 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 are many, are forgiven—for she loved much. But he who is forgiven

We read, **Luke 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.”**

Jesus hung out in the local pub with the working folk, he debated with the intelligentsia, and he went one-on-one with the demon-possessed and the devil himself! But even more loathsome was that he ate dinner with a Pharisee!

I jest. However, we'll see in a moment that when the Pharisee extended the dinner invitation to Jesus, his intentions weren't exactly pure. Jesus knew what He was walking into. But you have to love Him for it. He feared nothing. He walked into all kinds of trouble all the time as if saying, "You want a piece of this? Okay, let's go!" I think Jesus wanted everyone to see Him, to know Him for who and what He was, and have the opportunity to choose for themselves who He was to them and for them.

We read, Luke 7:37-38, "a woman of the city, who was a sinner, when she learned that he was reclining at table in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster flask of ointment,³⁸ and standing behind him at his feet, weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears and wiped them with the hair of her head and kissed his feet and anointed them with the ointment."

We are introduced to "a woman of the city, who was a sinner": This was a euphemism for a prostitute. So how did this woman get into the house? The Pharisee, whose name is Simon, as we learn later, was a rabbi. In the day, when a rabbi entertained, all kinds of people came to his home, freely coming and going, listening to the pearls of wisdom that might fall from his lips. That's how rabbis built a following, and that's how the prostitute got in the door.

Picture the occasion of the dinner like this: In the center of the dining area the food was set on the floor on platters. Everyone laid on cushions on his left side in a circle around the food, giving him freedom of movement with his right arm and hand for taking food from the platters. From above, the arrangement would've looked like a radiating star. Thus when the prostitute was "standing behind (Jesus) at His feet" she was standing along the outside ring of the circle.

We read that she had an "alabaster flask of ointment." It was customary that a Jewish woman carried around her neck a little vial of concentrated perfume in what was called an alabaster.

So the prostitute had been listening to Jesus speak over the previous days and weeks, and His words spoke to her heart. Perhaps she had heard him preach the Beatitudes. Maybe she remembered Jesus' saying, "**Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God... Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh. Blessed are you**

when people hate you and when they exclude you and revile you and spurn your name as evil, on account of the Son of Man!" (Luke 6:20ff)

I'm sure the woman had heard the Lord speak many other words as well, words of hope, of peace, and of forgiveness. Yes, especially forgiveness. And she heard these words with her heart, and she owned them.

So the woman stood behind Jesus, and she cried. Her tears were tears of sorrow mixed with tears of joy, and they fell on Jesus' feet. Her hair flowed freely, a terribly immodest thing in the day. But she didn't care. She knelt down and she wiped her tears from Jesus' feet with her hair. And then she took her most costly possession, her perfume in the alabaster, and she poured it on his feet, anointing Him with her love as her Savior. For He had saved her life by giving her His heart, giving her a reason to live.

We read, Luke 7:39, "Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner."

Simon the Pharisee believed that his power, affluence, and smarts were signs of God's blessing, God's favor, which made it impossible for him to connect what he was hearing with his heart and made it impossible for him to accept the gracious, redemptive message the prostitute and all the other people who followed Jesus had been receiving with thankfulness.

So Jesus appealed to Simon the Pharisee and the others who were present with an analogy. It was a very simple message, for Jesus wanted them to easily understand His point. Listen carefully to analogies for therein is a great teaching.

We read, Luke 7:41-43, "(Jesus said), a certain moneylender had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty.⁴² When they could not pay, he cancelled the debt of both. Now which of them will love him more?"⁴³ Simon answered, "The one, I suppose, for whom he cancelled the larger debt." And he said to him, "You have judged rightly."

Unlike a parable an analogy does not have several layers of meaning and difficult interpretations. Here, there's only one possible interpretation, and Simon walked right into it!

There were 3-things which a host always did for a guest who entered his home in ancient Israel. First, the host would touch the shoulder of his guest and then kiss his cheek. This

was a sign of peace. Next, he would pour cool water over his guest's sandaled feet, cleaning the dirt off them. And finally, the host would place a drop of rose-oil on his guest's head to rejuvenate him. But Simon the Pharisee didn't do any of these things for Jesus.

I'm sure that the other dinner guests noticed this lack of hospitality and anticipated a conflict from the very beginning! And indeed they got to watch it unfold.

We read, Luke 7:44-47, [JESUS] said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. ⁴⁵ You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss 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 are many, are FORGIVEN, for she LOVED much. But he who is FORGIVEN little, LOVES little."

What Jesus was saying about the prostitute was that she loved Him for everything He stood for. She treated Him with hospitality and she welcomed Him into her life. And it's no surprise. For she had experienced His compassion for her. Indeed, with His love He had lifted a great burden off her shoulders and He had healed her heart.

We read, Luke 7:48-50, "(Jesus) said to (the woman), "Your sins are forgiven." ⁴⁹ Then those who were at 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."

The woman was real; she knew her sin; she did not deny it. And for this reason Jesus was able to forgive her and to pronounce the absolution: "her sins which are many are forgiven." And she loved Him in return.

But Simon the Pharisee? He did not see himself as a sinner. He had drawn a line in the sand: Over there are the sinners, but over here are the good people, the people who have dedicated themselves to the things of God, people like me!

But if there is no confession of sins, there can be no forgiveness. However, when a person sees himself for what he truly is, that is, a poor miserable sinner, even when he is a devout Christian, and when he can see in Jesus God's love and forgiveness of sins, then he loves Jesus and he is filled with hope, peace, and forgiveness.

In one fell swoop, Jesus expelled the myth that there is anything in heaven or on earth that can separate a person from the love of God. The prostitute had faith and she was

saved. Period. Jesus did not give her a single condition for receiving God's love. He did not tell her to get her house in order, or that she had to be re-educated, or that she had to give her heart to God before she would be considered worthy of God's love. No! For Jesus gave His heart to her! And she believed it, and her faith in Jesus saved her.

St. Paul confirmed this good news in his letter to the Galatians, when he said, **"...we also have BELIEVED in Christ Jesus, IN ORDER to be JUSTIFIED by FAITH in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be JUSTIFIED"** (Galatians 2:16b).

When the prostitute touched Jesus with her tears, her hair, her perfume, and with her faith, she didn't become perfect. Rather, she was enveloped in the life of the one who is perfect, Jesus Christ. And He revealed what His life was all about when He showed her acceptance and said the words, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

I used to think that it was more desirable to be a good person and to be Christian, than to be a poor, miserable sinner and to be a Christian. After all, God must appreciate my efforts, right? Wrong! The Lord doesn't want our puny good works. Case in point: Simon the Pharisee tried real hard but was worse off than the prostitute who never tried at all! All she ever did was love Jesus.

What the Lord wants is a relationship, a confession, a devotion to His Son, the one who loved us so much that He sacrificed Himself on the Cross on our behalf. When we strive for that, then we enter into the one and only true relationship we will ever know, a relationship of trust, of love, and of peace with our God.

As we walk with our Lord in this faith the burdens of the day, the crises of the world, the turmoil in our families become strangely dim in the light of His glory and grace, as the song goes, and the words of Jesus to the prostitute become our own: **"Your faith has saved you; go in peace."**

Nothing can steal that away from you. Let's make it our own. I think of the words of our Lord, which we might make our own: **My faith has saved me; I have peace with God.** Say it with me: (My faith has saved me; I have peace with God.)

Friends, this week as you read in your Bibles the stories of Christ's ministry between Christmas and Easter may His heart for you become self-evident.

This week may you receive Jesus' words just like the woman who cried on his feet, knowing in your heart of hearts that He does not keep a record of wrongs, but His love covers over you.

And this week may you have the grace to share this same Good News with another person who really needs to know how much Jesus loves them. Amen.