

ASH WEDNESDAY

Luke 7:36-50

“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.’” And what sort of woman was she? Luke told us. She was ***“a woman of the city, who was a sinner.”*** Scandal of scandals, a sinner had come to Jesus. Can you believe it? But let’s be fair. Let’s look at the context.

First off, this Pharisee was one of the better Pharisees. Why do I say that? This Pharisee had invited Jesus to his house. It even seems that He gave Jesus a seat of honor, since it says our Lord ***“went into the Pharisee’s house and took his place at the table.”*** This place was probably next to the Pharisee, His host. How many of the Pharisees would have done this, would have invited Jesus into their own home and given Him a prominent place. Clearly this Pharisee was willing to listen. Clearly he thought Jesus had something to teach, even if he was still skeptical about just what or how much that was.

So what changed things? This woman changed it all. She barged in and let her hair down. And that was a big deal. Ladies, some of you have your hair down right now, and you might be thinking, “So what?” But you don’t live in ancient Israel, do you? A woman who let her hair down in public could be divorced by her husband at Jesus’ time.

Culturally, her act was scandalous. She’d let her hair down and touched our Lord, a man to whom she wasn’t married. Odds are she was a known prostitute or adulteress, and so the Pharisee wasn’t necessarily jumping too far to conclusions in interpreting her actions in a negative light. If you picture the scene, perhaps her body was even pressing against the Pharisee’s, her hair brushing against him, as she threw herself at our Lord’s feet. The Pharisee’s response was justified, culturally speaking, if not theologically speaking. This publicly sinful woman had barged into his house and behaved like a loose woman. So why didn’t Jesus stop her? Wasn’t he worried about His reputation as the Pharisee was?

Jesus sees more than hair. He sees the heart. He knew why this woman did what she did. She’d been driven to Him by a keen awareness of her sins. This was an act of repentance. She wasn’t worried about manners; she was worried about her salvation. She’d let down her hair to wash His feet with her tears. She’d brought an alabaster flask of ointment to anoint Him whose body other women would come to perfume in death, only to find Him risen for their justification, for this woman’s justification. And so, while Jesus could have rebuked and upbraided her for her less than tactful approach, He saw in her ***a bruised reed*** He was unwilling to break, ***a smoldering wick*** He’d come, not to extinguish, but to fan into flame. Our Lord will not, and indeed cannot, ***despise a broken and contrite heart***, and so He told Simon He had something to tell Him.

This Pharisee was a good Pharisee to invite Jesus into his house and assign Him a place of honor, but he still didn’t grasp what so many Pharisees failed to understand. Our Jesus had explained elsewhere in St. Luke’s Gospel, ***“Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick”*** (5:31). And by that He did not mean that the Pharisees had no sin, that they weren’t sick as well, but rather that only the sick will seek out a physician. That is what this woman was doing.

Can any of us blame this woman for her lapse in etiquette? She was sick, deathly ill. She had what appeared to be an incurable disease that had manifested itself in clear symptoms. Her public sins left no room for doubt. She needed a doctor. And like anyone who actually wants to get better, she wanted the best doctor she could find. And today she'd found Him. She'd found Him in the house of a Pharisee. And that might have scared away some, but not her. She knew her lost condition, and she was desperate to live, to be freed from her bondage to sin. And so she barged into the Pharisee's house. And so she pled with the Great Physician to heal her. She washed His feet with her tears. She anointed the feet that would be pierced for her transgressions. She came as a beggar. And our Lord can't and won't turn away a beggar. He is the Beggar King. She came with the only gift He can never refuse: repentance. And that was not a gift she had purchased herself, but a gift she herself had been given by God.

Jesus said to Simon, ***"Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven—for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little."*** I love that ***"which are many"*** that our Lord adds. I picture Him shooting a glance at some of the shocked faces of the self-righteous at the table. He wasn't only forgiving a sin or two here. No, He was forgiving many. If you're going to come to our Jesus with your sins, you might as well bring them all. And then He turned to her and said, ***"Your faith has saved you; go in peace."***

Has your love been cool lately? Remember what you have been forgiven. Forgiveness realized means love materialized. Have you been holding a grudge? How can you take hold of our Lord's forgiveness for your own sins if your fingers can't be pried of another's? Have you defined yourself in comparison or in relationship to someone else? Repent and define yourself only by your relationship with this One ***who even forgives sins***. Have you been slow to run to your Lord, to pray to Him, to listen to His Word, to hasten into His presence in repentance? Consider again your lost condition without Him. Examine again your thoughts, words, and deeds apart from Him. Remember again the fate of those who have little or no use for Him, who think they are well on their own. Today we begin Lent. There is no better time to undertake such reflection and there is no season when the reason our Lord has come is set more clearly before your eyes to drive you as a beggar full of contrition and a desire to amend your life and fall at His feet blessed because they bring good news and eternal life. And, fortunately, beggars, even though their sins be many, He is unable and unwilling to turn away or refuse. Amen.