

Faith of the Forgiven (Luke 7:36-50)

Faith Evangelical Free Church

7.18.17

Introduction to the Series, "Growing in Faith"

This summer we're going to explore the question of what it means to grow in our faith.

At some time in our lives we all face issues that make us wonder, "is my faith strong enough to handle this situation?"

- *Do I really believe God is good and that he is with me as I walk through difficult circumstances?*
- *Will my faith hold up when I'm desperate, or doubtful?*
- *What might it look like if I were to strengthen and deepen my faith in God, my trust and belief in all his promises?*

In the Hebrews 11:1 it says that "...faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen..."

- *as we seek to grow in our faith, we're not simply wishing things would happen or increasing our willingness to believe in abstract ideas.*
- *True faith is trusting, with an eager expectation, in the work and promises of Jesus Christ.*

Over the next eight weeks we'll examine different passages from all four gospel in which Jesus reveals something significant about a life increasingly dependent upon and trusting of God.

Whether you've been a believer for 50 years or for 5 minutes, if you're in a season of great struggle or a season of deep assurance, or if you're still trying to determine if a life of following Christ is for you, we hope that this series will help you better understand what it means to trust and believe in the goodness and faithfulness of our God.

Our passage today begins in Luke 7:36, where we find Jesus having accepted an invitation to recline and dine at the home of a man named Simon.

Now at this point Jesus had been preaching and teaching throughout the Judean countryside for about a year, and in that time he'd gained quite a reputation for himself. When he spoke, people wondered at the power of his words. When he taught, people were challenged to consider radical new ways of love. And when people came to him for help, they often left amazed by not only being healed of their sickness or injury, but also of having received something they hadn't even known they could ask for -- forgiveness for their sins.

But not everyone was amazed. For as much good as Jesus did, he also did things that made the Jewish authorities and theologians nervous, things that challenged their understanding of their own moral superiority.

He didn't keep a strict fast, he seemed to regard the Sabbath as a day to be enjoyed rather than obeyed, and most troubling of all -- he constantly befriended social outcasts, tax-collecting swindlers, and widely-known sinners.

And Simon couldn't figure Jesus out. So, he did what anyone might do who wished to get to know someone: he invited him over for dinner. In verse 36, we read:

[36] One of the Pharisees asked him to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and reclined at 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... (Luke 7, ESV)

The meal that Jesus was invited to was really more of a banquet, and would have been both a formal and open affair.

All the guests would have gathered around a table and reclined on their sides, with their feet extended behind them. While food was brought and wine replenished, the guests would ask questions of one another and engage in a lively, but still respectable debate.

Because Simon was a Pharisee, all the guests would most certainly have been Jews who Simon believed to be ritually pure. Pharisees were strict adherents to the laws and traditions of their faith, and avoided contact with sinners -- people whose way of life caused them to be categorized as impure. Pharisees did not share meals with anyone they thought might jeopardize their hard-earned righteousness before God.

Everyone at the table would have been there only by Simon's invitation, but the whole event would also have been open to the public. Just about anyone would have been allowed to enter the home and remain at the sides of the room to hear the discussion, so long as they remained silent and never approached the guests or the table. Many people would have jumped at the opportunity to pack the house. Which is probably how a woman with such an infamous reputation managed to slip in uncontested.

The passage immediately identifies her as "a woman of the city", a person with an unquestionably sinful way of life. We're not told the exact nature of her sin, but the terms used and the guest's reaction to her upcoming actions most likely hint that she had been a prostitute. She's hardly the kind of person one would expect to find in the home of a man like Simon, and certainly not someone Simon's guests would want to be associated with let alone touch or be touched by.

Which is why what happens next would have been quite strange and borderline scandalous for all involved. Returning to the text, we read that the woman hadn't shown up just to stand idly by. She had come with a purpose, something she felt compelled to do, and no amount of social propriety or cultural expectation was going to stop her from expressing what was in her heart. She walks in, picks Jesus out of the crowd as if he were far more friend than stranger...

[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. (Luke 7, ESV)

Remember being little and feeling really awkward when you bumped into your teacher outside of the school and thought, "whoa there, this is not where you belong!"? Take that feeling, combine it with whatever level of discomfort you have with public displays of affection, then toss in that nagging feeling you get when you've seen something you're not sure you should have seen...and you might have reached about 1/3 of how absolutely bonkers this scene would have been to Simon and any of his guests not named "Jesus".

Everyone watching would have felt a bit scandalized (remember, everyone thinks of this woman as a prostitute and she just waltzed right to Jesus, let her hair down, and began touching his feet). Everyone would have been doing some rapid internal assessment to try and interpret what they were seeing -- and two possible evaluations emerge.

One is to see the woman's act, awkward and unorthodox as it was, as an expression of profound love, humility, and gratitude. She enters a place society might rather she not be found. As she approaches Jesus she begins to weep, an outward proof of the jumble of emotions welled up within her heart. She uses her own tears and hair to wash the feet of Jesus, a humbling act usually reserved for servants or slaves. She kisses the feet of Jesus, and then brings forth her alabaster jar -- these jars were beautiful, carved, and extremely expensive. What's more, they were a one-time-use item; you had to break the jar open by snapping off the neck to pour out the perfume within. To use it was to lose it, and the woman sacrificed this costly item in order to display how much she, apparently, loved Jesus.

One could choose to see and understand this strange scene through the lens of compassion...or, one could choose to see it as Simon did: as something outrageously and inappropriately *wrong*. It was *wrong* for the woman to have entered his home, *wrong* for her, sinner that she was, to have touched his guest, *wrong* for her to be so intimately forward with Jesus...and come to think of it, it seemed perfectly reasonable to Simon to conclude that it was *wrong* for Jesus to be so okay with what was happening at his feet. The man should have been rebuking the sinful woman and casting her from the presence of those who worked so hard to live their lives in constant purity and perfection. Simon makes up his mind: this Jesus is no prophet. In v. 39, we read:

[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." (Luke 7, ESV)

In just a moment we'll continue on and see what Jesus has to say regarding the matter, but before we do I invite you to consider...if you'd been at this dinner party, how might you have responded? Would your first inclination be to view the woman and her actions through her reputation as a sinner? Or would you begin with compassion and wonder at what might have changed in her life to bring forth such a display of love as this?

When we judge people without truly getting to know them, when we assume upon their circumstances without considering how God might be at work in their lives, we more often than not end up revealing more about our own hardness of heart and the blindness we have regarding our own sins. We'd do well to remember that God is not quick to judge us at our worst, but instead seeks to be patient and loving even as we sin against him. In Psalm 103 it says that God is "[8]...merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. [9] He will not always chide, nor will he keep his anger forever. [10] He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities. Psalm 103:8-10. If God's sees fit to be merciful, gracious, patient, and understanding...it would be a good idea for us to follow his example.

Jumping back into our story, just as Simon was confidently assuring himself that Jesus could not possibly be prophet, for a prophet would know the true character and identity of this woman, Jesus chimes in. In a wonderful twist of irony, Simon was both absolutely right and terribly, terribly wrong -- a prophet would know this woman's heart...and Jesus knew it truthfully to be forgiven, faithful, and full of love. In very

prophetic fashion Jesus challenges the assumption Simon had only begun to form in his mind. Returning to the text, in v. 40 we read;

[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." (Luke 7, ESV)

Jesus tells a quick story in order to establish a broad principle that he'll shortly apply to the situation at hand.

Two people are in debt -- very, very in debt. A denarius was a single Roman coin and the usual day's wage for a laborer in the 1st century. One of the debtor's is said to own 50 denarii (den-ari-e), or 50 days worth of pay to the moneylender. The other debtor is in even worse shape, owing more than a year and a half's earnings. Both debts are crippling, both debts should have been paid -- and both debts are shockingly and gracefully cancelled.

Imagine having your student loans forgiven, your mortgage torn up, or your car payments cancelled. I'm willing to guess you'd be extremely grateful, not just for the forgiveness, but to the forgiver as well. After realizing just how much debt had been cancelled, you'd feel joyously compelled to love the one responsible for granting the cancellation.

The one who receives a great deal of forgiveness will in turn show a great deal of love to the forgiver. You get, I get, and Simon -- quite begrudgingly -- got it too. Jesus affirms his correct answer, and then reveals the reality of the woman's faith and the danger of Simon's blinding unbelief.

[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 little, loves little. [48] And he said to her, "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." (Luke 7, ESV)

It turns out, Simon had not invited Jesus over with entirely pure motives or extended him the kindness of cleaned feet and a kissed cheek that were signs of respect at the time. It'd be like having someone over to your home pointing them toward the food without so much as a "hello". Simon had given Jesus the "what have you done for me lately" treatment, expecting this friend of sinners to explain and prove himself before earning Simon's trust.

It also turns out -- and this part is easily misunderstood -- that the woman had arrived at the house not as a sinner, but as someone who had already met and been forgiven by Christ. Simon had it all wrong -- the woman, like the forgiven debtor, was not a sinner to be dismissed but a sister of faith overflowing with love for her Savior.

When had she been forgiven? The passage only leaves us the assumption that it happened sometime prior to Jesus' arrival at the dinner. Throughout the Gospel of Luke we are occasionally introduced to persons who have already begun their life of faith and decided to trust in Christ, in some way or another, though we're not told when or how.

In v. 47, Jesus acknowledges the woman's sinful past but refuses to let her be defined by it. He brings Simon up to speed: this woman's sins are forgiven. Her faith -- her trust in Christ and God's goodness to forgive sin -- saved her, and she's now free to live in peace.

Do you see what Jesus has done here? He has held up a woman with history of troubling sins as an example of someone who knows what she's done, knows she doesn't deserve the grace she's received, and by faith responds to that grace with an incredible demonstration of love.

As a Pharisee, Simon enjoyed a reputation as a godly man. He had the best theological education, a respected and enviable career, said all the right things, was seen with all the right people, and never missed a chance to practice and display his rigorous regimen of religious disciplines. He had all the sorts of things human beings tend to admire about others.

The woman's reputation had been, at best, disreputable. Her law breaking was public knowledge, her way of life a subject of public scorn. No one had ever thought of her as someone who could be or become a servant of God.

Yet it was the woman that Jesus praised as actually loving God much, while the pious and perfection-driven Pharisee was convicted as loving God little. What had the woman done that the Pharisee had failed to do? Simply this: she believed that she desperately needed the forgiveness Jesus offered in his Gospel. Simon, on the other hand, did not believe he needed much beyond what his own self-righteousness could secure.

"He who is forgiven little, loves little." This small sentence reveals an enormously important truth for every one of us we try to live out and grow in our faith: *"we will love God to the degree that we recognize the magnitude of our sins and the immensity of God's grace to forgive them."*¹

In other words, ***a person of faith can say from their heart: "I love this much because I've been forgiven so much."*** I am able to love God, love others, love my friends, and love my enemies this much, because I know God has graciously forgiven me of so very, very much.

Let's unpack this idea a bit -- what does it mean for us to believe in the truth that we are able to love much because we've been forgiven so much?

First, it means that our faith in God begins with forgiveness, not with self-righteousness.

The starting point of our relationship with Christ is not when we've got it all together or when we're the best version of ourselves -- it's when we bring our most honest self, the good, the bad, and the ugly, before Christ and lay it down at the foot of his cross.

¹ Bloom, Not By Sight, 93.

When we can recognize that we are indeed sinful and understand that we can't fix ourselves on our own, that's when we know God's working in our hearts and has already forgiven the things we've done that have kept us from running after his love.

Simon had come before Jesus as a Pharisee with impeccable credentials. The woman had come as a prostitute with little more to show her life of pain, struggle, and sin.

But only one had come ready to admit that their way of life, apart from God, was not working out. The woman had been honest before the Lord of Creation, had believed in his promise of forgiveness, and had thus been transformed into a person compelled to show great love for her forgiver and for others.

If you're here today and you feel as if you might need to be honest about your sin, whether for the first time in your life or the 500th, I hope you'll listen and receive this well: It's **okay to not be okay before God**. He understands, he gets it -- he knew **long before** you did just how much you need the forgiveness he's eager to see you receive. And he's here to hold you up, dust you off, and help you along your journey of faith.

One of the sweetest, most encouraging promise in all of Scripture is the assurance that God will never fail to forgive those who seek the gift of his forgiveness:

[9] If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. 1 John 1:9 (Luke 7, ESV)

Our faith begin with forgiveness, not with self-made righteousness.

Being able to say, "I love this much because I've been forgiven so much" also means delighting in what God has already done, not demanding he do more to your liking.

Consider, for a moment, the life of the woman from the passage.

Jesus declares that she has been forgiven, and praises her demonstration of love that flowed from that forgiveness. But the very fact that Jesus had to make this clear for Simon and the other guests tells us that she was able to love much even though her life circumstances had not dramatically changed.

In fact, they may have even become harder since being forgiven. Assuming that she didn't return to prostitution (Jesus generally encourages us to "sin no more" after we've come to know him), she was probably looking for a new job, a new home, and maybe even a new community that would be willing to accept her as someone forgiven by God. Things were still tough -- but she wasn't looking to things or her circumstances to bring her delight. Her joy flowed from her forgiveness and her relationships with Jesus.

Sometimes I think we lose perspective on what God has done for us, and we may even on occasion be guilty of loving him less, when we focus on what hasn't changed -- the new job we didn't get, the relationship that fell apart, the sickness we still suffer from, or even the world being a bit of a scary place to live.

Such things as these are hard to live with, but dwelling on what we don't have causes us to forget the incredible gift and forgiveness we do have. We can follow the example of this woman and keep our eyes and hearts set on Christ himself. We can remember what our salvation cost, that forgiveness did not

come cheap or easy, and that our God died and then conquered death so that we could be forever reunited with him. You don't have to wait for everything to get better to have great faith -- you can choose to cherish what God has already done (and eagerly await what he might do next).

Delight in what God has already done & do not demand he do more to your liking.

Finally, being able to say, "I love this much because I've been forgiven so much" also means you're freed to live a life of extravagant love.

Remember that alabaster jar of ointment the woman brought with her? Stuff like that was usually worth around 300 denarii -- nearly a year's pay. For a woman who was very likely looking for a new line of work and perhaps facing some lean times ahead, the decision to use it to anoint Jesus was costly and extravagant -- but it also expressed her great love for her Savior.

I'm not saying we all need to go out and start pouring expensive perfume on people as an example of how much we love them -- not sure that would end up having the desired effect. But I am saying that, as followers of Christ we always have a reason to be loving towards others -- because we are always loved by God.

Let that sink in: As someone who has been forgiven and saved by Christ, you will never again, for all eternity, live in a moment where you are unloved. God's love is with you, always. Let that truth motivate you, inspire you, and drive you to live a life of sharing extravagant love.

Chances are some of you have had an idea of some kind of extravagant expression of love -- a gift, a sacrifice, or even some kind and loving words for another -- and you've put it on hold. Today my encouragement for you is to consider going for it -- doing that thing that God has put on your heart.

One of the things that excited me the most about moving back to Manhattan was that I'd have the chance to get involved organization named Tandem. Tandem has some big dreams about helping kids and teens who are growing up in foster care prepare for life as they transition to adulthood. One of the ways they engage this mission is to provide mentors for teens in foster care who might benefit and grow from having an adult in their lives that is always willing to listen, to care, and to offer some guidance. When I heard about Tandem Mentoring, I thought "great, I'll do that!"

But then there were boxes to unpack, and a new job to adjust to, friends to make, evenings perfect for watching baseball... And all of a sudden a year had slipped by.

Although I continued to feel God tugging me toward becoming a mentor, I kept getting distracted by all the other thing that needed to get done and all the reasons I might not have the time. If I'm honest...I was also a little afraid that I wouldn't be any good at it, that it would be too hard, that I'd fail at being a mentor.

But God wouldn't let it go. He wanted me to show my love for him and for others in this way, and he reassured me that I'd be able to love like this, because he'd already forgiven me, strengthened me, and given me a faith that could carry this responsibility with Jesus right there beside me, shouldering far more than his share.

So...I got trained as a Tandem mentor. And once a week, for the next year, I'll get the chance to hang out with an awesome young man. Last week we spent 3 hours hanging out, eating cheeseburgers, buying catfood, and talking about life. The activities aren't extraordinary, but I'm hopeful as the weeks go by our time spent together will be meaningful for the both of us.

The time I give up is a sacrifice, but in a really spoiled, soul-satisfying kind of way. The anxiety and insecurity I feel about what it means to be a mentor is a weakness within which God can show off his strength. The love I share is a reminder to me that I am able to care for others because Christ, every day, cares for me -- new mercies and forgivenesses help me put my feet on the ground and get out of bed.

As a believer in Jesus Christ you are equipped -- by virtue of God's love for you and Christ's total forgiveness of all your sins -- to love others, love them well, and even love them extravagantly. This week I encourage you to consider what act of love God might be tugging at you to carry out. Buy coffee for the person behind you and tell them you hope it brightens their day. Stop and have a conversation with man or woman holding a "anything helps" sign by walmart, and let them share about their life. Offer to pray for them, and if you are able, consider how else you might help. Send a letter to a friend who lives far away and let them know that you miss them.

Maybe some of those resonate, or maybe God's calling you in a totally different direction. Whatever it is, don't delay. You've been forgiven much so you can love much. Lean into it.

Be a person of faith, and say from your heart, ***"I love this much because God has forgiven me of much."***