

“The One To Whom Little Is Forgiven”
Luke 7:36-50
Sermon series: “Who Do You Say That I Am?”
Today’s answer: Jesus, the one who forgives

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I’d like to take a trip down memory lane with you this morning.
All the way back to last fall.

Last fall, one of the sermons that I preached in our fall sermon series was on the subject of forgiveness.

Now I’m not expecting you to remember the sermon from last fall.
Heck, I have trouble remembering what I preached from this pulpit last month, never mind last year.

But when I was planning for this fall’s sermon series, and I went back to look at that sermon from last fall, I was reminded that the focus of that sermon was on the act of forgiving. Offering forgiveness to someone else.

This morning, our subject is forgiveness:
Jesus, the one who forgives.

But our focus is on the act of RECEIVING.
Receiving forgiveness.

Not the hard work of extending grace to someone who wounded you, but the challenge of receiving grace when you or I have wounded someone else.

Will Willimon, who teaches at Duke, recalls the time that he was having a conversation with some of the other faculty:

“I said something about what a bad book had been written by a professor at another seminary,” he writes.

“I added that I expected a bad book from someone who was such a jerk.

“After the group had moved away, no doubt duly impressed by my candor and wit, a...colleague lingered and said, ‘The person whom you just trashed was the only person to stick by me in my divorce, the only person...to offer me help and comfort. But I want you to know that I intend to forgive you for your boorish insensitivity. You are forgiven.’”

Willimon goes on to say:

“...that offer of forgiveness did not feel that good to me. Until I got the forgiveness for being an insensitive boor, I did not know I was an insensitive boor.”¹

Has this kind of thing ever happened to you?

Have you ever been forgiven for something you didn't know you did wrong until the person you wounded pointed out what you did wrong?

I'd like to take a trip down memory lane with you this morning.

I'd like you to call to mind a time in your life when you EXPERIENCED forgiveness. Go back to last week, or go back to last fall, or go back to whenever you need to go to retrieve that memory.

When someone forgave you for something you did that you really ought not to have done. Or when someone forgave you for not doing something you really ought to have done.

What was that experience like?

Was it easy to accept the grace that was offered you?

Was a humbling experience?

An embarrassing experience?

A liberating experience?

What's it like to receive forgiveness?

¹ William H. Willimon, “The First Word,” in *Thank God It's Friday: Encountering the Seven Last Words from the Cross*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006.

In our text for this morning, Jesus is invited by Simon the Pharisee to have dinner at Simon's house.

And an uninvited guest arrives.

Luke describes her as "a woman in the city, who was a sinner."

Upon arrival, the woman washes Jesus' feet with her tears.
She anoints his feet with ointment.

And Simon the Pharisee is offended:

"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."

So Jesus tells a story.

It's a story about two people in debt.
One owes fifty denarii, the other five hundred.

Side note: a denarius was the equivalent of a day's wage.

So consider what your household income is at the moment, and think about what that means your income is on a daily basis...what's 50 times that number?

What's 500 times that number?

You can do the math later.

The point is that one of these is a large number, and the other is a REALLY large number.

Both debts get canceled by the creditor, says Jesus.
Who is going to love the creditor more?

"I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt," says Simon.

And Jesus' point is clear, right?

It's Simon the Pharisee who owes 50, and the woman in the text who owes 500—therefore, she shows Jesus greater love.

All of which sounds fine and good, except that when Jesus makes a tally of who did what wrong—it's Simon on whom he spends more time...

“...you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet...”

“You gave me no kiss, but...she has not stopped kissing my feet.”

“You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment.”

It's as if Jesus is being intentionally AMBIGUOUS here.

Which one of these people—the woman or the Pharisee—is truly the person with the greater debt?

Or never mind the woman and the Pharisee.

What about you and me?

What happens when we try to locate ourselves in this little story that Jesus tells?

If I'm placing myself in this story,

I would like to think that I've got a debt of 50,
not a debt of 500.

That my faults, though real, have not been too grave.

That my mistakes, though numerous, have not been too many.

I'd like to think that I'm the one who only owes 50.

But then Jesus says, “the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.”

Wait a minute.

Does that mean if I'm in the 50 category, the ways I love are too small?

That I haven't shown as much grace as I could have because, in my heart of hearts—I don't really believe that I've needed very much grace?

When I take a trip down memory lane, I recall the time that I was on the verge of graduating from seminary.

One more final exam to take.

It was a class that I had not enjoyed very much, and I blamed the teacher.

We got the class evaluation forms, and I was sure it was the teacher's fault that I disliked the class, and I let her know just how I felt on the evaluation. It was SCATHING.

I ripped the syllabus apart, I ripped her lectures apart.

I told her just how much her teaching needed to improve.

Of course, it never crossed my mind at the time that there may have been other reasons why I was disengaged from that class.

It couldn't have been senioritis...oh, no.

It couldn't have been my own nervousness about not having a job at graduation, not knowing what my future would hold...oh, no.

When I was writing that evaluation, it never crossed my mind that both of my parents were/are teachers, and if one of their students had ever ripped into them like that, I would take offense!

Here we are now, over two decades later, and I can see that evaluation that I wrote much more clearly. I can see that it was a careless and mean-spirited thing to do.

And, from this distance, I can see quite clearly—that as soon as I turned it in, I was in my professor's debt, because I was in need of her grace.

Have you figured out what you owe yet?

If you're the debtor who owes 50?

Or the one who owes 500?

You see, I keep coming back to that troubling little verse in our text:

“But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.”

First I wanted to be that person, because owing less is better.

But then I don't want to be that person, because loving little is worse.

All of which makes me wonder...
 I wonder if there really is such a person?
 I wonder if Jesus really had such a person in mind?

We may have moments when we THINK we're the person who needs only a little bit of grace, who only has this much debt to climb out of...

But I wonder if those are the moments of our greatest self-deception.

What if the good news of this text today is that when Jesus made that statement—the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little—what if the good news is that Jesus had NO ONE in mind?

That this person is a PURELY IMAGINARY person...because there is no one who is in need of being forgiven...just a little?

You and I can go around in circles trying to figure whether we're the debtor who owes 50 or the debtor who owes 500, but I suspect all that circular confusion is Jesus' point.

What if Jesus is saying...STOP.
 Stop trying to be a theological accountant.

There's NO WAY we can know our own debt, and there's no way to know another person's debt.

We're all living in the red, every day of our lives.
 Just live each day like your debt was 500—and "was" is the important word.
 Because according to Jesus, all debts have been wiped clean.

Is that an easy thing to do?
 To live like you had an enormous debt, but it's been erased?

Sometimes it's not such an easy thing to do.
 Sometimes there's something inside of us that RESISTS even having the SMALLEST debt erased, because we really want to take care of it ourselves.

The retired professor of preaching, Tom Long, describes a “brush with the law” that he had a few years ago.

Pulling out of a gas station, he had to cross four lanes of traffic to get into the left-turn lane. But before he could complete the maneuver, traffic stopped, and his car was stuck in between two lanes—

the nose of the car in one,
the tail of the car in another.

To his astonishment, Tom Long then saw police lights in the rear-view mirror. The policeman got out, wrote a ticket, and said, “You are impeding the flow of traffic, you have violated section 62.130 of the [state] code.”

“What is that?” Long asked.

“Look it up in the library,” the officer replied.

So he did.

Long says he went to the library, read the code in question,
and came to the conclusion that he had NOT impeded
the flow of traffic.

So he challenged the ticket.

A court date was set.

Tom Long got on the Internet, he did more research, and he entered the courtroom on the appropriate date with a file folder TWO INCHES THICK to prove he had not impeded the flow of traffic.

When the time came, the judge called him to the bench.

“The officer who wrote your ticket is no longer employed by the county,” said the judge.

“There is no one here to bear witness against you. You are free to go.”

And Tom Long says that he did not jump for joy.

Why? Because something inside of him wanted to scream:

WAIT! You can’t dismiss my case like this!

I have a file folder that PROVES I'm innocent!

And it may have been true.

He may not have been guilty of impeding the flow of traffic.

But at that moment, when the judge simply let him go, Long says he had something of a revelation.

What he saw clearly at that moment was that there was something inside of him that would “rather win the fight than be blessed by grace.”²

I wonder if any of you recognize that same something inside of you.

That something that would rather win the fight,
 would rather earn what you receive,
 would rather everyone “gets what they deserve”—
 than have everyone be blessed by God's grace.

Receiving forgiveness, accepting grace—it levels the playing field.

It's not always easy to receive grace, is it?

Especially when the giver of the grace is God, and God's just tossing that grace all around, even to sinners like the woman in our text, even to self-righteous people like Simon the Pharisee in our text...

 or even to folks like you and me.

People who pride ourselves on being able to pay back whatever it is we owe.

So let me take another trip down memory lane with you this morning...
 at least, it will be a memory for some of you.

In the mid-1980s, the movie *The Mission* came out.

Do any of you remember this film?

² Thomas G. Long, “Down by the River,” in *Journal for Preachers*, Pentecost, 2009.

The slave-trader Rodrigo Mendoza murders his brother and then feels such remorse that he cannot forgive himself.

Challenged by a Jesuit priest to exact his own penance, he joins the Jesuits in their mission to the native people of a village in South America, the same people he used to enslave. But on his journey to the natives, he carries this huge fishing net full of armor.

Weapons, shields, instruments of war, in a net three times his size.
He's punishing himself:

he carries them up the mountain, and then he falls;
and he carries them up the mountain, and then he falls...

It's a tortuous journey, and even the missionaries want him to stop, to get rid of the bag—but Mendoza refuses.

He won't let it go. He cannot stop.

Finally, at the top of the mountain, one of the native inhabitants—
a member of the tribe that Mendoza used to enslave—
he RECOGNIZES Mendoza!

He approaches with a knife, ready to kill Mendoza for all the evil that he's done. Mendoza doesn't respond. He's ready to accept his fate.

But then the native who is holding the knife reaches down...and cuts the rope. The weapons, the baggage—it's all gone, tumbling down the mountain.

And Mendoza is left weeping, laughing in gratitude...

Now I don't know what baggage you've brought with you today.

But let me take one more trip down memory lane with you right now.

Do you recall saying a prayer of confession together in this service not too long ago?

And do you recall what we said together right after that prayer?

In Jesus Christ we are forgiven.

In fact, say it with me right now, one more time:

In Jesus Christ we are forgiven.

You know what that means, don't you?

It means that Jesus has cut the rope.

No matter what you've done,

no matter what you've failed to do—

the baggage is gone.

Your slate is clean. It is God's gift to you.

So go...when you leave this sanctuary, go share that gift with the world...

Amen.