

“An Uninvited Guest”
Luke 7:36-50
Transfiguration of the Lord

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In his book *Tattoos on the Heart*, the Jesuit priest Gregory Boyle recalls a parish he served in the 1980s. It was a church that decided to open its doors to homeless immigrants during the week. Which meant that every night, homeless and undocumented workers would sleep in the church.

The church’s decision was not without consequences.
Threatening messages arrived on the answering machine.
Graffiti appeared with not-so-kind things to say.

But there was another problem as well.
The SMELL.

On Sundays, Boyle and others in the church would come early and do everything they could to eliminate the odor that the men who slept there left behind.

They’d sprinkle “Love My Carpet” all over and then vacuum like crazy.

They’d put potpourri in strategic places.
They’d burn incense, use a lot of Air Wick.

**But the smell persisted...nothing would get rid of it.
And how do you think the parishioners responded?**

People complained.

Finally, in worship one day, Boyle decided to face the problem head on. During his homily, he asked the congregation a very direct question:

“What’s the church smell like?”

People were mortified.
Eye contact ceased.

“Come on,” Boyle said, “What’s it smell like?”

Finally, an old man (who never cared what other people thought), called out, **“Smells like feet!”**

***“Excellent,” Boyle replied.
“And WHY does it smell like feet?”***

“Because many homeless men slept here last night,” a woman answered.

“Why do we let that happen?” asked Boyle.
“It’s what we committed to do,” said someone else.

“And why would we commit to that?” asked Boyle.
“...Because it’s what Jesus would do,” someone said.

“Well then,” Boyle replied, **“what does the church smell like now?”**

“It smells like commitment,” one man called out.
“It smells like roses!” another woman shouted.
And everyone in that church laughed and cheered...¹

¹ Gregory Boyle, *Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion*, New York: Free Press, 2010.

I share that story with you because there's a smell in this sanctuary today.

Did you notice it?
It's not coming from the pews.
It's not coming from the air ducts.
I think...it's coming from our text.

Our text for today is about forgiveness.

Mark Twain once said, "Forgiveness is the fragrance that the violet sheds on the heel that has crushed it."²

You see, there's a smell, a fragrance to this text,
this story of God's forgiveness...
what does it smell like to you?

It's a story that's told in all four Gospels.
But each of the Gospels tells this story in a slightly different way.

Matthew and Mark put the scene at the home of Simon the leper.
Luke says it took place at the home of Simon the Pharisee.

Matthew, Mark, and John all say that it took place at the END of Jesus' ministry, that Jesus was being anointed for his burial.

Luke says it took place earlier in his ministry.

And Luke is the only Gospel writer to make it a story about forgiveness.

² As quoted by Marina Cantacuzino, in "The Forgiveness Project," Plough Quarterly, March 1, 2025, found at [The Forgiveness Project by Marina Cantacuzino](#).

Jesus is invited to eat at the home of Simon the Pharisee.
 But then a woman from the city, an uninvited guest, shows up.
 She has an alabaster jar of ointment.
 She washes Jesus' feet with her tears.
 She pours the ointment on his feet.

Jesus says to Simon:

“Do you see this woman?

I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet,
 but she has bathed my feet with her tears...

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.

...I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven;
 hence, she has shown great love.”

Our subject this morning is forgiveness.

And I think what Luke wants to know is this:

what does forgiveness smell like to you?

Before you answer, look at the inside of your bulletin.

The quote from Desmond Tutu—

“Without forgiveness, there is no future.”³

It's one of my favorite Desmond Tutu quotes.

And most of the time, I think of that quote in terms of the person I
 need to forgive.

³ Simon Wiesenthal, *The Sunflower: On the Possibilities and Limits of Forgiveness*, New York: Schocken Books, 1998.

In other words, we cannot go forward in our own lives,
 unless we can forgive the one who has wounded us,
 or cheated us,
 done some injustice to us...

No future, unless we forgive.
 But I wonder if Tutu also meant it the other way.

There is no future...
 unless we understand the forgiveness and grace—
 that we have ALREADY received from God,
 that God has already SHOWERED on the world,
 in Jesus Christ.

Do you see the difference between those two sides of forgiveness?
 Not the forgiveness we offer, but the grace we receive.

There's someone in my life right now that I'm having a hard time forgiving. It's not any of you, don't worry. It's just...I'm not ready to do it yet. It takes time, sometimes, to work through the ways that other people wound us...I will forgive one day, but I'm not ready to do it today.

All of which is good material for another sermon.
 But that's not this sermon.
 Because that's not the forgiveness Luke is focusing on in this text.

Today's text is about the forgiveness that comes from God.

Jesus says to the woman:
 "Your sins are forgiven."

Luke's version of the alabaster jar story is about the forgiveness of God that goes out to every one of God's children.

It's about what God has already done to wipe the slate clean...
 not only for the woman...
 but for the Pharisees of the world,
 and the Presbyterians of the world,
 and the prodigals of the world,
 and the people who don't even believe in
 God in this world...

You see, forgiveness is a pretty big deal in Luke's Gospel.
 It is in all the Gospels, but Luke really works this theme.

Parable of the prodigal?
 Running away from home, squandering your inheritance—
 Luke says repent, and you can still be forgiven.

Parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector?

The tax collector stood far off, beating his breast, confessing his
 sin before God...and he, said Jesus, went home justified....and forgiven.

It sounds easy enough to swallow, so let me ask you a question:

How many of you believe—
 no need to raise your hands with this—
 how many of you believe that if someone repents, turns
 from the wrong they have done and goes to God and pleads for God's
 grace, God's grace is deep and wide and wild enough to wipe the slate
 clean, no matter what that person has done?

A number of months ago, I saw the movie "Zone of Interest."

It's about the Nazi officer Rudolph Hoss, the commander of Auschwitz, and how he and his family lived right outside that monstrous evil, just going about their lives as Hoss oversaw the mass murder of millions of Jews.

I didn't know anything about Hoss, so I looked him up after I saw the movie.

He was caught and executed after the war.
Held accountable for his ghastly deeds.

But I also learned something very unsettling.
Shortly before his death, Hoss returned to the church.

He wrote, "...I have inflicted terrible wounds on humanity...May the Lord God forgive one day what I have done."⁴

I read that, and I wished I hadn't read it.
Does the forgiveness and grace of God really go that far??!!

Because there's a huge part of my heart that doesn't WANT it to go that far. Do you see how the grace and forgiveness of God might not smell so good to us?

How it might offend us or disgust us?
Or go against every notion of right and wrong inside of us?

And yet Luke doesn't stop there.

Do you remember what Jesus says from the cross in the Gospel of Luke?

⁴ From Wikipedia's article on Rudolf Hoss, found at [Rudolf Höss - Wikipedia](#).

Not “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”
That’s Matthew and Mark.

In Luke, the first thing Jesus says is this:
“Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.”

In other words, forgiveness doesn’t just come after repentance, in the Gospel of Luke. For those who put Jesus to death, it also came BEFORE repentance. It came with no repentance!

The Reverend Dr. John Buchanan died last month.

He was the pastor at Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago for 27 years, former moderator of our denomination.

I remember he once preached a sermon on forgiveness.
And he very helpfully pointed out the PROBLEMS with it.

Forgiveness “is tricky,” he said.

“...forgiveness sometimes [feels like it] fails to take seriously the tragedy and pain and suffering caused by evil...Forgiveness sometimes feels like betrayal—of the victim, of our family, of our faith, of our very humanity.”

Dr. Buchanan then told about a friend of his, “whose family has suffered the most devastating loss imaginable: the murder of a daughter and sister, her unborn child, and her husband. The young man who did it is in jail and will be for the rest of his life.

“My friend has thought about this as deeply and more immediately than any theologian or legal scholar. She writes in an article on the

death penalty, which she opposes, “Does healing require forgiveness? As a Christian, it does for me.

“Let me be clear: I forgive the killer not because he has an excuse; he had none whatsoever. I forgive not because he asked for it; he hasn’t. I don’t forgive for him. I forgive for the One who asked and taught me to—for God; for the author and protector of my faith, Jesus Christ.”⁵

So maybe I was wrong a few minutes ago.

Maybe this sermon does have something to do with the forgiveness we extend to other people. Maybe that grace that we offer is all tied up and dependent on the grace the FIRST comes to us.

Back in the 4th/5th century, St. Augustine said it much better than me. You see, Augustine—he had a notion of God’s grace called “prevenient grace.”

Have you ever heard that phrase before?
Prevenient grace?

“It’s the idea that God’s grace and forgiveness actually come to us before we ask, before we even think about it. This grace, Augustine said, is the basis of our relationship with God: not our moral goodness, not our theological orthodoxy, certainly not our...credentials, but God’s grace.”⁶

How many of you are elders in this congregation?

⁵ John Buchanan, “The Hardest Thing of All,” Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago, IL, preached on March 25, 2007.

⁶ Ibid.

Every year, one of the questions that elders are required to know the answer to is why we baptize babies in the Presbyterian Church...don't worry, I won't call on any of you for the answer.

The answer is prevenient grace.

Grace that comes first, before we're old enough to be aware of that grace.

And I wouldn't just call it prevenient grace.

I'd call it INTRUSIVE grace.

Grace that intrudes upon our lives, disrupting them and reordering them and rearranging how we think about other people. How we decide to forgive other people.

Or even how and when we decide to forgive ourselves.

Do any of you have any mistakes in your life that you wish you had not made?

Can you think of the worst one?

And even though you hear the words, "In Jesus Christ we are forgiven!" every Sunday, you still have trouble accepting it as truth?

When your past mistakes come to mind, or maybe it's just the worst mistake, it's like this baggage that you always carry with you?

Do any of you remember the film, *The Mission*?
From the mid-1980s?

The setting is South America, 18th century.

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 Paraguayan jungle, the same people he used to enslave. But on his journey with the Jesuits, he carries this huge fishing net full of armor.

Weapons, shields, instruments of war, in a net three times his size.
Why is he carrying all this?
He's punishing himself.

He tries to carry the weapons up the mountain, and then he falls.
And he carries them up the mountain again, and he falls again...

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.

Finally, he reaches the top of the mountain.

But once he's there, one of the people who live in that Paraguayan jungle—a member of the tribe that Mendoza used to enslave—
he RECOGNIZES Mendoza!

He knows the evil that this man has done to his village.
So he pulls out his knife!

Mendoza doesn't respond.
He's ready to accept his fate.

And then...do you remember what happens next?
The man who's holding the knife—doesn't use it against Mendoza.

He uses it to cut the rope.
The rope that's tied to the net with all those weapons of war.

And the armor, the weapons, the baggage—it goes tumbling down
the mountain.

Mendoza begins to weep, and then he's laughing in gratitude...

He knows now, beyond a shadow of a doubt—
that which he could not give himself—
has been given to him.

The grace of God breaking into his life...
giving him a second chance at life.

He knows what it's like to be forgiven.
And the good news this morning is so do you.

All that baggage you're carried with you
into this sanctuary this morning?

It's gone, all gone...
Jesus has cut the rope.

(Amen.)