

Tell Me Something Good

The Good News Is . . .

. . . love for God and neighbor

Southminster Presbyterian Church

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Texts: Luke 7:36 - 50
Matthew 25:35 - 40

Opening Prayer

Good news God,
speak louder than the news updates.
Speak louder than our mental distractions.
Speak louder than our anger and louder than our fear.
God, speak loudly to us today,
because we long to hear your good news once more.
With hope we pray, amen.

Sermon

In this story from Luke 7, we encounter hospitality, inhospitality, compassion, judgment, and learn about grace. It's a lot packed into one story.

First of all, Jesus is invited to a meal in the home of a pharisee. In my time with children not long ago, I talked about how the pharisees tithed even their herbs. These were well-intentioned teachers of the law. They meant well. At least at first. They wanted to follow the rules. In fact, they were so committed to following the rules that they kind of made the rules themselves into idols. They began to equate rule-keeping with God-pleasing and holiness. And once you start down that road, it can be a long, long road. Tithing their income became tithing their spices and herbs. Praying can become praying a certain amount of time to be sure it's enough. They began to set up rules around the rules to be followed just to be extra sure the actual rules simply couldn't be broken because they were so well protected.

At my school, as is still true in some expressions of the church, that looked like no dancing . . . because who knows what dancing might lead to, so it's better not to dance at all. Well that's a problem. How is that going to work for Marylou whose Star Word, I happen to know, is "dance"!

Whatever the intention, the Pharisees were known for rule-keeping. They protected their holiness at great cost to themselves and others.

So in this passage, Jesus has been invited into Simon's home for a meal. All the rules would be followed. All the "i"s dotted and the "t"s crossed. Nothing left undone.

Remember last week how Jesus had the servants fill the jars intended to hold water for ritualistic cleaning with water and then turned it into fantastic wine (I'd prefer rootbeer or lemonade,

myself!)? On this day, they were no doubt filled with water. And as they prepared to share a meal, I have no doubt they all washed as required by the ritualistic laws. Actually, the law required washing hands before eating and especially after returning from the market where they might have chanced to touch something unclean. Pharisees, therefore, washed not just their hands, but their wrists and sometimes up to their elbows...just to be extra sure about their purity!

And then they would take their place at the table. Likely they would not be seated at a table as we eat. Rather, they would eat in what we might think of as the roman style. A low table with cushions around it. They would lean on an elbow with their feet stretched out away from the table.

While washing hands was prescribed, washing feet was not. It wasn't required by the law and was more an act of hospitality and comfort. Shoes consisted of sandals and roads were either dirt or stone with lots of dust. When coming in, it was common to have a servant wash the feet of the guests. Apparently Simon didn't value this more social convention. Or maybe his servants were all occupied getting ready for guests. Whatever the case, Jesus' feet did not get washed. And then they took their places at the table.

Maybe Jesus had posted on his FB page that he was going to Simon's for that meal, because this woman shows up at Simon's house uninvited. Houses often had open courtyards, so entering through a side door wasn't difficult. It wasn't difficult, but it was bold. Especially because as a "woman of ill repute", she knew very well that pharisees did not want to be around her. Nowhere near her. They didn't want her sinfulness to somehow contaminate them. They didn't want rumors . . . I mean, what would people think if they knew she came to his house???

But she didn't ask. She had the confidence to simply stride in. Maybe she moved in wealthy circles. Maybe she was often allowed in places other women like her were not. Or maybe she made herself so close to invisible that she was unnoticed until it was too late.

She had a bottle of perfume. A pound of pure nard. Nard? I looked it up:

“Nard, or [spikenard](#), is a rare, fragrant, and costly ointment derived from the root of the Himalayan plant *Nardostachys jatamansi*. It has been used for centuries in perfume, traditional medicine, and religious rituals, specifically for anointing in Christianity. It features a woody, musky scent and has sedative qualities.”

This is a lot of perfume. 16 oz? And it was expensive. Scholars say it would cost an average worker 10, 12, or even more months of income. Had she bought it? Was it a family heirloom? A way of saving money for when extreme misfortune hit? I don't know much about perfume, but when I did a search for perfumes online with names I could pronounce, I found an appropriate one by Amaffi named Tears of a Sinner! 16 oz of this would cost nearly \$30,000! And I'm sure there's more expensive stuff to be found.

She began weeping at his feet. Were they silent tears? Was she wailing? The tears flowed. She used the tears and her hair to clean Jesus' dusty feet. Then she anointed them with this expensive perfume. And started kissing Jesus' feet!

Simon judges her silently, but Jesus hears it. Whether it was his omniscience or the look he saw on Simon's face, he heard it. And in response, he has questions for Simon that serve as a rebuke. Simon had not offered common hospitality, but his woman had offered her very tears. He goes on to make it clear to Simon that this woman understood grace deeply. She knew the freedom of

forgiveness. Jesus had said that he came to set prisoners free. In this moment when Jesus received her tears and her anointing, when Jesus recognized her in the presence of those in power, when Jesus affirmed her value and declared her welcome and even praised her above his host, in that moment, she was freed of all that had bound her. Her heavy heart was light enough to fly. That's what happens when you're seen, known, and affirmed. Affirmed not because you've changed. Affirmed because you're seen.

Jesus saw this woman when others refused to. They looked the other way. Her clients, willing to pay for her services in private, treated her as unknown at the market. Others kept their distance afraid that her reputation would tarnish their own just by proximity.

Regardless of how much money she did or did not have, she was the least of these by her position in society.

In our passage in Matthew 25, Jesus says that whatever we do to the least of these, we do to him.

This is hard. Who are the least of these and how do we treat them? As a congregation, we're trying to be aware of our immigrant community that is part of the least of these. Undocumented and fearful.

I don't know about you, but harder for me are others. The people by the street selling flowers or fruit. I don't know what to do for the least of these. Those asking for money at intersections. I don't know what is true or who has handlers. Are they being used? Am I being used? I spend a fair bit of time wondering as I alternate between making eye contact or avoiding it. Giving money or not giving. Wondering if bags with supplies in them are appreciated or discarded.

Sometimes when we're not sure how to apply scripture, I find it helpful to turn to the faithful who have gone before us. A quote on one of our devotional cards this week from A Sanctified Art was from Mother Theresa. She said, "If you can't feed a hundred people, then feed just one." That seems more approachable to me. I can't multiply five fish and two loaves into food for five thousand. And I don't know how to solve the complex challenges of those who are unhoused or unstably housed. But I can help one person. I may not be able to solve everything for them. But I can make them feel seen.

And if doing that feels outside of my wheelhouse, there are ways to do that together. Ways like volunteering like we heard about in the announcement this morning. Or through supporting the amazing work of Blanchet House like you all have alongside our children and youth.

The woman anointing Jesus' feet didn't need to be best friends with him or with anyone else. But she did need to feel human and seen.

That's the least we can do. Refuse to allow others to be invisible. Whether they pump our gas, ring up our groceries, stock shelves at stores, bathe our animals for us, take our blood pressure, or sell fruit at the corner. We all want to be seen. Most of all, the least of these. Amen.