

A Friend of Sinners—Our Friend

Focus: Then he said to her, “Your sins are forgiven.”—Luke 7: 48

Luke 7:36-43

Luke 7:44-50

Each of us is more than the worst thing we’ve ever done.—Bryan Stevenson, *Just Mercy*

The presence of a noble nature, generous in its wishes, ardent in its charity, changes the lights for us: we begin to see things again in their larger, quieter masses, and to believe that we too can be seen and judged in the wholeness of our character.— George Eliot, *Middlemarch*

Esteem and gratitude are the proper motives to love.—Henry Fielding, *Tom Jones: The History of a Foundling*

First Scripture Lesson: Luke 7:36-43

“With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them except in parables.”

So says Mark, in his Gospel, about Jesus, and so say Matthew and Luke about him in theirs as well.

Parables are the poetry of teaching—engaging the imagination, the intellect and the heart. Jesus didn’t invent them (they’ve been part of every wisdom tradition since time immemorial) but he certainly makes ample use of them.

Parable—a comparison, usually involving images, often memorable ones; from the Ancient Greek “Para-bole”—literally to put two (or more) things beside one another:

A is to B: the kingdom God is like a mustard seed

A is to B: The kingdom of God is like yeast

A is to B: the kingdom of God is like a pearl of incomparable value

Often the comparison involves more than two elements, and becomes a kind of analogy: As A is to B so C is to D:

“It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.”

Which is really: As A-B, so C is to D only more so (even more difficult for the rich person), a lot more so, in this case.

So a parable—a comparison with memorable images, and it usually has a twist—an unexpected turn: it can be like a riddle—challenging us as to what it means, what wisdom it has, and (especially) how it applies to us.

Sometimes a parable can be extended, and becomes a vignette, or even a short, short story:

“There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.’”

That’s the opening of the Parable of the Prodigal Son, of course. And that story works by an implicit analogy: As A is to B, so C is to D. As the Father in the story is to both of the two sons—almost inconceivably loving, forgiving—so God is to us, only more so, infinitely more so. But that still leaves the question: how does this apply to “us”? Which one are we, the older brother or the younger? (More on that later.) For now, this much: a parable poses a challenge as to what it means, its wisdom, *and* how it applies to us.

So a comparison using memorable images (that’s the imagination), challenging our understanding (the intellect), and posing a question as to who we are and how we might live—our values if you will (our heart)—parables, the poetry of teaching, engaging the whole person.

The parable I’m about to read is one that Jesus tells at a dinner party hosted by a Pharisee named Simon (more on why he invited Jesus later). But first to understand this parable—to be able to hear it—we have to notice the *unspoken* thought that Simon has—“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.”

Although that thought is left unspoken, Jesus, prophet that he is, sees into Simon’s heart and knows it. And it’s that thought that prompts him to tell this parable. Luke Chapter 7, verses 36-43; listen now for God’s Word to us:

One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee’s house and took his place at the table. And a woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee’s house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment.

She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair.

Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment.

Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, “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 spoke up and said to him, “Simon, I have something to say to you.”

“Teacher,” he replied, “speak.”

“A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii (a lot of money back then), and the other, fifty denarii (still a lot, but obviously much less). When they could not pay, he canceled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?”

Simon answered, “I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt.”

And Jesus said to him, “You have judged rightly.”

Second Scripture Lesson: 7:44-50

“You have judged rightly.” Simon seems to understand the parable: As A is to B, so C is to D, only less so, a lot less so:

AS the five-hundred denarii debtor is to the forgiving creditor, so the fifty-denarii debtor is to the forgiving creditor—both have love for him, but the fifty-denarii debtor, less, perhaps at least ten times less.

Simon gets it. Or does he? Does he see how the wisdom of this parable applies to him? Maybe not. But remember a parable often has a twist, an unexpected turn: So Jesus turns towards the woman, and then to Simon, and then turns back to the woman again. Listen for that as you listen for God’s Word to you, continuing in Luke Chapter 7, picking up with verse 44:

Then turning toward the woman, Jesus said 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 and dried them with her hair. *You* gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in *she* has not stopped kissing my feet. *You* did not anoint my head with oil, but *she* has anointed my feet with ointment.

“Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; since she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.”

Then Jesus said to her, “Your sins are forgiven.”

But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, “Who is he to forgive sins?”

And Jesus said to the woman, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.”

Sermon

“If this man *were* a prophet”—that Jesus is allowing *this* woman—*this sinner*—to *touch* him, only confirms what Simon already knows: Jesus is no prophet.

Prophets are supposed to have special insight, especially into the human heart. As Simon sees it, if Jesus were a prophet, he would surely know what a sinner this woman is—and not let her touch him, not let her anywhere near him.

The conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees, already simmering, is coming to a boil.

Just a few days earlier, Luke tells us, “the scribes and the Pharisees were watching Jesus to see whether he would cure on the Sabbath.”

And when Jesus does, healing the man with the withered hand, “the scribes and the Pharisees were filled with fury and debated with one another what they might do to Jesus.”

What to do *to* him is a point of uncertainty among them, because of Jesus’ growing popularity. Luke writes, “a great multitude of people from all over came to hear him teach and to be healed. And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, because power came out from him and healed all of them.”

Soon after that, Jesus heals the centurion’s servant, not by touching him but just by saying the word from afar. And then, coming upon a funeral procession, Jesus, from compassion, brings the widow’s son back to life. And so Luke tells us, “word about him spread throughout Judea and all the surrounding country. The people were “glorifying God,” saying: “A great prophet has risen among us! . . . God has looked favorably on his people!”

So in light of Jesus’ growing renown as a prophet, as nothing less than a gift from God,—what *can* the Pharisees do to him? Well, for now, not much: so they stick to those time-honored tactics: backbiting and innuendo: “he’s a glutton and a drunkard,” they whisper, “a friend to sinners.”

So yes, Simon invites Jesus to dinner—but not out of hospitality or friendship, only to keep an eye on him: maybe he’ll do something they can use against him.

And you can tell this because Simon doesn’t offer Jesus even the common courtesies of the day: water to wash his hands and feet upon entering the house, oil to anoint his head, and most especially a kiss of greeting from the host—these would be given to any and every guest at a dinner party.

That Jesus doesn’t receive these common courtesies is an affront—a deliberate, affront. A prophet? Not to Simon! He’s not even a person worthy of notice, though of course, the whole time is Simon is watching him like a hawk.

The conflict is coming to a boil.

So when Jesus contrasts the woman’s behavior to Simon’s, he’s *not* saying, “You see, Simon, she gives me five hundred denarii’s worth of love whereas you give me only fifty denarii’s worth.” The parable may start out sounding that way, but remember every parable has a twist, an unexpected turn.

No, when Jesus turns to the woman, and then back to Simon, what he's saying is this: "You see, Simon, she recognizes *me* for *who* and *what I am*: a prophet, yes, and more than a prophet: she recognizes me as the one, the chosen one of God, with the power to forgive sins. Whereas, you, Simon, don't recognize me at all."

In other words, Jesus sets up the parable with its implicit analogy—As A is to B, so C is to D—only to blow it up when he applies it to Simon. As the woman is to Jesus, so Simon is to Jesus, only not so much because his sins are fewer and of lesser magnitude, maybe only loving him 1/10th or even 1/100th as much? No, not in the slightest.

As A is to B, so C is not at all to D! "You see, Simon she gives me all the love in her heart, which is overflowing, while you give me only suspicion, envy, and enmity—which is choking your heart."

So, despite what Simon and the other Pharisees may think, there's nothing excessive about the woman's display of love for Jesus. It's the fitting response to who and what Jesus is and the new life he gives her.

It's Simon who is deficient—as a host towards Jesus, but even more than that in his understanding of the parable: oh, he may get how the parable works initially, at a literal level. But he really doesn't get it as it applies to himself: he doesn't get it that he too is a sinner, every bit as much in need of forgiveness as this woman is, only worse, far worse, because whatever the number and magnitude of his sins relative to hers, he is unable to see, to acknowledge, that he too is a debtor, a sinner, and that he too needs forgiveness. And even worse, he is unable to see who and what Jesus is—the one with the power to forgive not just sins, but *his* sins.

Jesus, prophet that he is, sees into Simon's heart, sees his manifest pride and his hidden shame, the burden that he carries with him everywhere he goes, every day of his life.

Simon's pride manifest itself in his belief that his goodness and his righteousness are his own doing; and his position and prestige, well-deserved. His shame is hidden because, beneath all his self-regard, in a place he can hardly acknowledge to himself, much less to God, Simon fears that this is who and what he is and nothing more—a sinner.

But Jesus sees more than that, sees deeper than that, in Simon: he sees a person who can still be healed. Love sees more. Because of who and what Jesus is, he sees who and what Simon really is—a beloved child of God. Love sees more. So Jesus turns to him: "Simon I have something to say to you."

*You desire truth in the inward being, O Lord;
therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.*

And Jesus, prophet that he is, also sees into the woman's heart: sees her manifest shame and her hidden pride, the burden that she carries with her everywhere she goes, every day of her life.

Her shame manifests itself in her belief that goodness and righteousness are forever beyond her, and that this is all her own doing, and the scorn and contempt the world heaps upon her is well deserved. Her pride hidden because, beneath all the self-loathing, in a place she can hardly acknowledge to herself much less to God, she fears that this is who and what she is and nothing more—a sinner.

But Jesus sees more than that, sees deeper than that in her: he sees a person who can still be healed. Love sees more. Because of who and what Jesus is, he sees the woman for who and what she really is—a beloved child of God... Love sees more. So Jesus turns to her: “Your sins are forgiven.”

*The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.*

Parables are the poetry of teaching—engaging the imagination, the intellect and the heart.

Two people were at a dinner party one night: one, a man named Simon, much admired, hosted the event; the other, a woman of low reputation, disdained by many of her own people, showed up uninvited, and made . . . well, something of a scene.

As A is to B, so C is to D: As the woman was to Jesus, so we are to Jesus, or as Simon was to Jesus, so we are to Jesus? A parable poses a challenge as to what it means, its wisdom, and how it applies to us.

Or course, sometimes the comparison in a parable is simple and direct: A is to B: Sin is a like a rock—a huge flat slab of shame and pride—that we carry around on our backs everywhere we go, every day of our lives. It weighs us down, bends us over double so that we can see almost nothing of the beauty and the glory of the world, the love all around and within us.

And of course sometimes a parable can be extended becoming like a short story: “There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.’”

AS A is to B, so C is to D. As the Father in the story is to both of the two sons—almost inconceivably loving, forgiving—so God is to us, only more so, infinitely more so. But “us”? Well, which one are we, the older brother, or the younger? A parable poses a challenge.

At this point in Luke’s Gospel, it’s clear that Simon is the older brother, but it’s also clear that Jesus sees more in him than just that:

As A is to B so C is to D: “As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.”

That’s true for Simon as much as it is for the woman washing Jesus’ feet with her tears, as much as it is for us.

The real question is whether we can acknowledge our need:

But when in a distant country, the son began to be in need, he came to himself, set off, and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion—

“While he was still far off,” our Lord can heal us from afar just as he did the centurion’s servant. If we cannot touch him in the flesh, he can come to us, to touch us in the Spirit. The Pharisees were right about one thing: he is a friend to sinners.

And what happened when the father, running, did finally reach his prodigal son? Well, you know the story:

He put his arms around him and kissed him. ‘Quickly,’ he shouted, ‘bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this one of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found! And they began to celebrate.

And why not? Any time the weight of wrongs, the burden of pride and shame, the sorrows of the past—that slab of sin—is taken off someone’s back—anyone’s back—it’s cause for celebration. And no such celebration, no expression of love and gratitude, should ever be deemed excessive: this is joy, this is peace, this is life.

Two people were at a dinner party one night: one, a man named Simon, much admired, hosted the event; the other, a woman of low reputation, disdained by many of her own people, showed up uninvited, and made . . . well, something of a scene.

Of the two, who do you think went home in joy—and at peace—that night? Who would you rather be?

Will you pray with me?

Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and put a new and right spirit within me.
Do not cast me away from your presence,
and do not take your holy spirit from me.
Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and sustain in me a willing spirit.

In the name of our Lord and Savior—and friend—Jesus Christ. Amen.