

January 24, 2010 - "The difference that encountering Jesus makes." Luke 7:36-50

This morning, we are continuing on in our sermon series through the gospel of Luke. Luke is one of the four narratives that you find in the Bible that give us the details of Jesus' life, ministry and message.

Of the 4 gospel stories, Luke is the broadest in scope, especially as it relates to his audience. For example, the gospel of Matthew is written more specifically for a Jewish audience... outlining all the ways that Jesus fulfilled prophecy after prophecy from the Hebrew Scriptures. Luke, however takes a different approach. Because Luke himself is a Gentile (a non-Jew), he places special emphasis in his gospel on how Jesus is good news for everyone. Jesus is the Savior of the whole world, not just those who are of Jewish ethnicity. Jesus has come to bless and love groups that were typically outside the "in" of what was going on in 1st century religious culture: women, children, people of mixed ethnicities, tax collectors, notorious sinners, and more. These people who have typically been outside the action with God, are given direct and transforming experiences with Jesus.

This morning, in our journey through Luke, we come to a story with that kind of emphasis. Let's read this passage from Luke 7, I'll pray and then we'll pull out a few thoughts that I hope will be helpful to each of us. *Luke 7:36-50*

36 One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to have dinner with him, so Jesus went to his home and sat down to eat. 37 When a certain immoral woman from that city heard he was eating there, she brought a beautiful alabaster jar filled with expensive perfume. 38 Then she knelt behind him at his feet, weeping. Her tears fell on his feet, and she wiped them off with her hair. Then she kept kissing his feet and putting perfume on them.

39 When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would know what kind of woman is touching him. She's a sinner!" 40 Then Jesus answered his thoughts. "Simon," he said to the Pharisee, "I have something to say to you." "Go ahead, Teacher," Simon replied.

41 Then Jesus told him this story: "A man loaned money to two people—500 pieces of silver to one and 50 pieces to the other. 42 But neither of them could repay him, so he kindly forgave them both, canceling their debts. Who do you suppose loved him more after that?" 43 Simon answered, "I suppose the one for whom he canceled the larger debt."

"That's right," Jesus said. 44 Then he turned to the woman and said to Simon, "Look at this woman kneeling here. When I entered your home, you didn't offer me water to wash the dust from my feet, but she has washed them with her tears and wiped them with her hair. 45 You didn't greet me with a kiss, but from the time I first came in, she has not stopped kissing my feet. 46 You neglected the courtesy of olive oil to anoint my head, but she has anointed my feet with rare perfume.

47 "I tell you, her sins—and they are many—have been forgiven, so she has shown me much love. But a person who is forgiven little shows only little love." 48 Then Jesus said to the woman, "Your sins are forgiven." 49 The men at the table said among themselves, "Who is this man, that he goes around forgiving sins?" 50 And Jesus said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

PRAY

So, in the story we just read, we find three main characters: There's Jesus, of course. Next there is Simon the Pharisee. During the 1st century, the Pharisees were a leading religious group in the Middle East. They were devout Jews that were longing and expectant for God to send the Messiah, someone to rescue them and deliver them, much like Moses had done in rescuing the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt.

The Pharisees had gotten frustrated, because they only saw things getting worse and worse. Their conclusion was that God wasn't sending a Messiah, because God's people had strayed too far from obeying God's laws. So, in response, they had gone head-first into a lifestyle and system of strict and radical obedience. In many ways, they would have been considered by many to be the most moral and upright people in that day. But there were some things about their approach that ended up shutting them out from experiencing real life, especially from Jesus. More on that in a bit.

And then the third character in this story is a woman. She goes unnamed, only referred to as an immoral woman. While we don't know for sure, there is a connotation that her immorality might have been sexual in nature – maybe that she was the town prostitute or had a well-known reputation for sleeping around.

Whatever the case, it seems that everyone knew who she was and what she had done. If you grew up in a small town, like I did, you realize how this works. In small towns, everybody knows everybody else's business. Some of you know what I mean? And so it was with this woman... just like you might know who the town drunk or the town druggie was, this woman was “the sinner” of the town.

With all that in mind – here is the amazing reversal of fortune that happens in this story. The good guy (Simon the Pharisee) seems to miss out on the wonderful things of Jesus, and the sinner (the bad gal) seems to get it, and experiences some amazing things with and from Jesus. This reversal of fortune doesn't just happen in this story... you'll find this same “turning things on their head” thing over and over throughout the gospels.

How in the world does that happen? Maybe we get familiar enough with this dynamic in the gospels, that it begins to lose its shock value.

Imagine for a moment, the most prominent person you can think of in our day and age that espouses strict morals, and exacting ethics... and in turn, imagine someone that is a known and confirmed sinner – not just in the general sense, but, like this woman, everyone would know their business, and there's no doubt about their lack of morality. Do you have a couple of people in your mind? Now... imagine this story happening with them. Maybe that helps to re-insert some of the shock value – how riveting this encounter would have been to those involved and those who first heard it.

All that said, for the rest of our time, I'd like to have us think about 4 sets of competing choices – 4 sets of options about how we can approach Jesus, and I suppose, in how we can approach all of life.

I'd assume that most of us would rather receive good things from Jesus and experience more of his life, rather than less. What kinds of things can we learn from this set of encounters, that help us to experience the goodness of Jesus, like the woman did, and avoid missing out on the good stuff of Jesus, like the Pharisee did? Sound good?

So, here is the first set of choices: **the choice between faith and skepticism**. There is something about the woman's response to Jesus that is about faith, and conversely there is something about Simon's response that is steeped in skepticism. Let me explain a bit more about what I mean by both of those.

With Simon, it seems that his whole purpose for inviting Jesus over to dinner was to size Him up. Simon was pretty sure he knew what God was like, what God was supposed to do, and how God deals with people, and he wanted to see if Jesus fit into his religious box.

As the story moves along, and the woman enters the scene, we see Simon's skepticism a bit clearer. Simon's logic goes something like this: If Jesus were a prophet, He would know people's character. If Jesus knew this woman was a sinner, He would have nothing to do with her. From those premises, Simon then make some conclusions: that since Jesus has accepted this woman, Jesus doesn't know her character. And since Jesus doesn't know this woman is a sinner, He cannot be a prophet. Thus, Simon concludes that Jesus is not a prophet and he can reject Him, His message and ministry.

The thing is: skepticism isn't always bad, but it's only one way to know things. And sometimes, like here in this story, it fails us. Simon seems to get stuck, not only in skepticism about who Jesus is, but also that Jesus could actually be good to someone like this woman. It just doesn't fit Simon's mold of how God would work.

On the flip side, think of the woman. Something has happened to her and/or with her that she has come to believe that Jesus will be good to her. That He might love her and welcome her in a way that could transform her. At least in this passage, we don't get any clues about how she comes to this bold faith, but we see that something must have happened with her for her to take the steps that she takes. In some tremendous fashion, the woman has been captured by the welcome of Jesus. So much so, that she has to respond. She has to respond in faith towards Jesus.

So... there's a question that I've been tossing around a lot recently. It's a question about what we really believe about God. Here it is: at the baseline, when any of us turn toward God, towards Jesus – do we believe that He is going to be good to us, or is He going to shun us, slight us and judge us? What do we believe about the goodness of God?

I know for myself, if I'm honest, it's a mixed bag. I've known for a long time, in my head, that God is good, and he generously welcomes anyone that turns towards him, but it seems like, on another level, I can find myself having a really hard time believing that deep down in my heart. I think God has been trying for 20 years or better to convince me of His goodness, but it's been quite a process.

As I've pointed to in a few ways over the past month, this is something I feel like God is doing in me right now. I am coming to believe on a deeper and deeper level that God really is generous. That every time I turn to Him, He wants to be good to me. He wants to pour out His mercy and grace and a deep sense of love and acceptance into my life. And I have to tell you – it is making a HUGE difference. I am finding myself experiencing more peace and rest. Things that I might fret or worry about aren't hitting me the same.

It seems to me, the more and more I think about this, I read about it, and pray about it... there is nothing quite like knowing the amazing and gracious welcome of Jesus. It changed this woman's life. It has changed my life in so many ways, and is still doing that.

How about for you – what difference does it, or what difference would it make for you to know on a deep, deep level that God loves you; that God welcomes you; and that you really can believe that God is that good?

I think that has the potential to change everything. That deep sense of security can change, not only how we approach God, but also how we parent our kids, how we go about our jobs day by day, how we deal with conflict and hard situations. If we know, deep down in our knower, that God is good to us everytime we turn to Him – it can touch every area of our lives.

If you've never known that, if you've never experienced that, it's been my prayer, and our prayer this week that you will. And even if that's been something you've encountered before, I believe God has more – He wants to instill that sense of his love and welcome deeper and deeper into you. I'm eager to see what He wants to do along those lines, even this morning.

I could go on that forever, but we should probably move on. Here's a second set of choices that we find in this passage: **the choice between forgiveness and judgment**. This is natural extension of what we just talked about. At the core, do we believe that as we turn to God, that He is forgiving, or that He is going to condemn us?

It seems that Simon, the Pharisee, was stuck in judgment. All he could see was what was wrong with everyone else. Have you been in places like that before, or been around others that seem to get stuck in that pattern? It can be amazingly destructive, can't it?

You see, it doesn't take any amount of spiritual maturity to recognize something as being wrong and judge it. Anyone can do that. And, in the end, judging someone or something doesn't actually change anything. It only reinforces our sense of moral or spiritual superiority over someone else.

But experiencing and extending the transforming forgiveness of Jesus is different. Forgiveness changes things in ways that judgment alone can't. Don't get me wrong, forgiveness is not sweeping something under the rug, or just turning your head away, or saying that something doesn't matter.

With forgiveness, there is the ability to be absolutely honest about the fact that something is wrong, but also have a solution for that wrong. Think of Jesus' interaction with the woman in this story. Was he naïve about what was going on in her life? No way – he was just as honest about the sin that she was caught in as Simon the Pharisee was. The difference was that Jesus had a solution. Whereas Simon could only offer up judgment.... Jesus offered the woman forgiveness. And.... I think we can see for ourselves which one made an impact.

Here's a tip that I can throw out to us: in whatever ways you can – rid your life of judgementalism. Don't live in the land of judgment. It's a dreary and miserable place. Instead, live in the land of forgiveness. Using the analogy that Jesus gave Simon – whether we are the one that's been forgiven 500 pieces of silver or 50... the reality is that each of us need forgiveness.

It's there... there in the land of forgiveness, we can be absolutely honest about our sin, our shortcomings, and experience transforming grace. There we can be honest about the sins and shortcomings of others and offer that same grace to them. That has so much more to offer than living in judgment. God help us, empower us, to live that out.

Moving on here, here's the next choice we see in this story: **the choice between expressiveness and detachment.**

Maybe because of his judgment and skepticism, Simon hadn't really experienced anything of the goodness of Jesus yet, and so he didn't know how to respond or have anything to express.

Somehow, this kept him from even some basic customs of hospitality. As Jesus says, Simon doesn't offer water to wash Jesus' feet, which would have been a common expression of hospitality during that time period, as was offering oil for someone's head or body, as a relief from the arid environment. And Simon doesn't greet Jesus with a kiss, the Middle Eastern first century equivalent of a handshake.

In modern day terms, it's like one of us having someone over, not offering to take their coat, not offering them a place to sit down, or offering them something to drink as they enter. That's the kind of common hospitality that Simon was missing.

In summing up Simon's actions, though, I don't think he was necessarily being mean – I think he was just detached. Again, he hadn't really let Jesus matter to him yet, and so he didn't have anything to offer back to Jesus.

The woman on the other hand, has lots to express. She has been so touched, so impacted by Jesus, that she has to respond. She has to let Him know how much of a difference He was making in her life. And so, she washes Jesus feet with her tears and dries them with her hair. She kisses Jesus' feet over and over. The woman takes expensive perfume and pours it out over Jesus' feet, anointing them with oil. Some of those actions might seem a bit odd and extravagant to us, but that was how this woman responded. She had to express to Jesus the difference He had made.

I spent quite a bit of time this week pondering what this story might mean for our approach towards worshipping God. Not just in the times of singing that we do here on Sunday mornings, and in small groups, but also in the whole of our lives. What can we learn about worship from this story?

As it relates specifically to singing and making music to God in worship... it is amazing how much that comes up in the Bible, and how boldly the Scriptures call out to us to express ourselves to God in that way. For example, here's how that comes out in Psalm 47.

1 Clap your hands, all you nations; shout to God with cries of joy. 2 For the LORD Most High is awesome, the great King over all the earth.

5 God has ascended amid shouts of joy, the LORD amid the sounding of trumpets. 6 Sing praises to God, sing praises; sing praises to our King, sing praises.

The language of Scriptures like this is not just some nice suggestions – they are strong and bold commands to God's people. Maybe that's because worship is so powerful – we need to be reminded in strong ways to pursue it... not only because it honors God, but also that it does something in us.

For as much time and effort that preachers like myself put into sermons... it's is often encountering God in the midst of worship that makes the biggest changes for people. As I look back in my own life, there are a few sermons that have made BIG differences in me and numerous times of prayer that have changed things significantly for me, but I'd have to say, it's times of God's nearness in worship that make up the largest number of experiences that have likely shaped my life the most.

That's a reason why, here on Sunday mornings, we take roughly half of our time together here to sing to God in worship. So – with all grace and freedom to each of us... let me encourage you to express yourself in worship to God. It's a time to express to God how grateful we are to Him for His love and grace; it's a time to express how much we continue to need Him; it's a time to express our trust and commitment towards Him.

Again – we really want our church to be a grace-filled and performance free environment. So don't get hung up on what you are or aren't, or what someone else is or isn't doing to express worship God. Let's just worship God in a way that's authentic and intentional. Can we give ourselves to that?

There's a bunch more I could say about worshipping God in other ways, but I'm running out time here... so we'll save that for another time.

One final thought and then we'll spend some time responding to God in various ways. We've talked about the choice between faith and skepticism, the choice between forgiveness and judgement, and the choice between expressiveness and detachment. Maybe a final way to sum things up today is with **the choice between hope and despair**.

On some level, this woman had no reason for hope. She was the town sinner, and to everyone around her, she was condemned to repeat the same patterns over and over again. But somehow, in the person of Jesus, the woman found hope. She found a path that lead towards life instead of despair.

As nice and helpful as the thoughts and points I've shared this morning might be, here is the ultimate reality that we need to grab hold of... Jesus made an amazing impact in this woman's life. The encounter she had with Him changed everything.

And, in turn, that is our hope. Our hope isn't in fixing ourselves enough to be acceptable to God. Our hope is Jesus. Whether is it for the first time, or the thousandth time... Jesus wants to reveal Himself to you. He wants to be good to you. He wants to draw you and me into an amazing and transforming experience of His grace. I believe, that as we turn towards Him this morning, that is His posture towards us. His arms are wide open towards us, welcoming us into His presence.

Are you eager to know that, to experience that? I hope so, and I'd like to pray for us, that we could interact with God along those ways.