

FAITH OF A WOMAN WHO LOVED JESUS

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE

Luke 7:36–50

A VERSE TO REMEMBER

[Jesus] said to the woman, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.”
(Luke 7:50)

Daily Bible Readings

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| M | Apr. 15 | Luke 7:11–18 | Jesus’ Compassion for the Grieving |
| T | Apr. 16 | Ps. 92 | Sing Praises to God’s Name |
| W | Apr. 17 | Jas. 5:12–20 | Confession, Prayer, and Healing |
| Th | Apr. 18 | Micah 7:7–20 | God Pardons Iniquity and Transgression |
| F | Apr. 19 | Ps. 86:1–7, 11–17 | God Is Good and Forgiving |
| Sa | Apr. 20 | Rom. 8:1–16 | No Condemnation in Christ |

STEPPING INTO THE WORD

Most of us have family stories that get told over and over. We retell stories when something funny or remarkable happened. We retell stories of important events, sometimes joyful, sometimes traumatic. As we share stories over time, some details get repeated and cemented, and others left out and lost. If you ask several people to tell the same story, some wording and details may be similar, but others will change. We remember stories differently; depending on why and to whom we repeat the story, we tell it differently. That story about a speeding ticket, you might tell it one way for a friend and another way for a judge.

Today’s story is like that. Each Gospel includes a story of a woman anointing Jesus and the ensuing controversy, but they aren’t told the same way. The other stories are in Matthew 26:6–13, Mark 14:3–9, and John 12:1–8. Did it happen more than once? Was one story changed accidentally or for storytelling purposes? We aren’t sure. But like all of Scripture, each tells us something true about God and about us.

The four versions differ in every basic aspect of information. They don't agree on *who*: the host is either Simon the Pharisee or a leper; the woman is either unnamed or Mary of Bethany, the sister of Lazarus. They don't agree on *what*: she uses her tears, perfume made of nard, or ointment from an alabaster jar. They don't agree on *where*: it is either in Bethany near Jerusalem or in Galilee. They don't agree on *when*: either just before Jesus' death or early in his ministry. They don't agree on *how*: she uses her hair or her hands to wash or anoint Jesus' feet or head. They don't even agree on *why* the controversy happened: it's either because the woman wastes something costly or because she is a sinner. What they do agree on is that Jesus uses the action of the woman, and the response of the host, to demonstrate what love and faith really look like. We all need more stories about that.

Lord, help us listen, learn, and retell your story. Amen.



SCRIPTURE

Luke 7:36–39, 44–50

7:36 One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and when he went into the Pharisee's house he reclined to dine.³⁷ 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.³⁸ She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair, kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment.³⁹ 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." . . .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.⁴⁵ You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet.⁴⁶ You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment.⁴⁷ Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven loves little."⁴⁸ Then he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven."⁴⁹ But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?"⁵⁰ But he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

Note: Find Scripture Notes for this reading on the final page of the lesson.

AT SIMON'S HOUSE

Luke's version takes place during Jesus' ministry in Galilee. He has been drawing crowds and stirring up conflict with some of the religious establishment. Some are curious, though, including Simon the Pharisee, who invites Jesus home to eat.

We know some things about first-century meal customs. A host would greet a guest with a kiss, then share a ritual (and practical) foot-washing. The guest's sandals would be removed and water applied to their feet either by a servant or—in a show of respect—by the host themselves. Meals were usually served on low tables, and guests would recline, leaning to one side. Doors were often open and, outside the home of someone wealthy, those who hoped for the generosity of leftovers might gather.

An unnamed woman described as “a sinner” enters Simon's home, carrying an expensive jar of ointment. We aren't told what her sin is, and this is the only version that describes her as such. In retelling, it is often assumed her sin is one of promiscuity, but there is no evidence for that, apart from her hair being used to dry the feet of Jesus. Loose hair could just as easily have been a sign of shame or mourning.¹

The woman is overcome. She weeps, bathes Jesus' feet with tears, then kisses and anoints his feet. The Pharisee watches but does not ask her to leave. He is interested in what Jesus will do. We get some of the Pharisee's inner monologue; he decides Jesus must not be a prophet, since he would have known the woman was a sinner and therefore would have rebuked her.

Jesus does know things. He knows what Simon is thinking. In response, Jesus poses a kind of parabolic riddle for him about a man forgiving debts, which Simon interprets rightly. Jesus then contrasts the woman's effusive love with the sparing hospitality shown by Simon. He declares her sins forgiven.

The Greek word used for *forgiven* comes from the same word used in 4:18 when Jesus says he has come to proclaim *release* to the captives. It means a letting go rather than holding on.² Simon, though a man of faith, has shown a rigid sort of hospitality, holding onto judgment of the woman and expecting Jesus to do the same. Jesus is more interested in faith and love that overflow out of open hands rather than clenched fists.



How does the idea of forgiveness as *release* resonate with you? Where do you see examples of it?

1. Cynthia A. Jarvis and E. Elizabeth Johnson, eds., *Feasting on the Gospels—Luke, Volume 1: A Feasting on the Word Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), 209.
2. Sharon H. Ringe, *Luke* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 111.

MORE THAN ONE THING

Both Jesus and Simon are well-versed in the rules of their shared religious tradition. They know what is expected of faithful people and what the Law requires. When in the presence of a woman publicly known as a sinner, however, they couldn't be more different in how they view her. Simon stands back in judgment. Jesus welcomes her and praises her actions.

And what of the woman? Surely she was used to people like Simon, shaming her quietly and out loud. Most likely she had never encountered anyone like Jesus before. News of his teaching and healing have certainly made the rounds. Maybe she was in the crowd when he said, "Blessed are you when people hate you and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven" (6:22–23).

Some people reading this story get all tied up in the order in which forgiveness and faith happen. Does Jesus forgive sins because we show great love and faith? Or do we show great love and faith as a response to our sins being forgiven? This is a question whole theology books have addressed. Trying to drill down in this brief lesson into exactly *how* or *when* feels like Simon's tight-gripped consideration of the woman during dinner. Jesus isn't waiting for her to tick off enough boxes in the right order to qualify for grace. He doesn't need to make sure she is worthy before allowing her close. He has already welcomed her, even before she boldly crosses the threshold of Simon's house.

Imagine what it takes for her to enter. How many people does she walk past with that jar of ointment, who judge her as Simon did? How many whisper about her, retelling stories of her sin, ignoring their own? She knows Jesus is different. He has already changed her life. When she finally comes close, her gratitude overflows into tears and kisses and loving acts of hospitality.

Luke gives us a story about more than one thing. It's about hospitality and welcome. It's also about forgiveness and faith and love over judgment. It's about letting go of shame so we can hold on to grace. It's about Simon and our tendencies to judge others as he did. It's about the woman and how we struggle with our own failures and faults. Most of all, it's about Jesus, the one who offers each of us a fresh chance.



What would you say the main point of this story is? If you had to give it a title, what would you call it?

STEPPING INTO THE WORLD

We don't know what happened after this story, for either the woman or Simon the Pharisee. We don't find clues about how their experience with Jesus changed them. Our task, regardless, is to let it change us.

Like the woman, our faith in Jesus frees us from whatever sin we carried in the past, or even today. We don't have to work to measure up, or hang back waiting to be invited to be close to him. We are known and seen completely, and we are forgiven. This can make us brave and bold. Our love and faith call us to overwhelming gratitude, regardless of what others think.

Like Simon, we are called to check our assumptions about ourselves and everyone else. It's a peculiarly human trait to have a tendency toward judgment of others. When we in the faith community assume we have the moral or spiritual high ground, we are more like Simon than we truly want to be. Our outward-facing gestures of welcome need to be reassessed in light of what Jesus really looks for in acts of hospitality and love.

An experience like Simon and the woman both had in the presence of Jesus should change their relationship not just to Jesus, but to one another and to all whom they meet afterward. Imagine the transformation that could come when those who know Jesus welcome one another with open hands, releasing hold on everything but love. Perhaps that is what Jesus hopes for when he tells the woman to go in peace. She may know internal peace from being forgiven, but is she stepping back out into a community that knows how to support one another as forgiven and freed people? Maybe that's why all four Gospel writers include a version of this story with its image of overflowing faith and love—because we need to hear it over and over again.

We began this lesson by thinking about how stories can change as we retell them. Let's end knowing that we can change by telling our stories. You have stories of faith. Tell them! Tell about how you came to know you are loved by God just as you are. Tell of when you've experienced welcome. Tell of when you thought you were getting it all right but then someone showed you a better, more grace-filled way. Tell stories to yourself—or to trusted friends in faith—of your own sin and shame, then tell the part where you are forgiven and freed. Most of all, tell Jesus how very grateful you are.



What story of faith do you have to tell today?

SCRIPTURE NOTES

The following notes provide additional information about today's Scripture.

1. There is a distinction between “oil” and “ointment” in 7:46. Olive oil was typically used to cleanse and refresh traveling guests, but the woman brought a costlier and more valuable gift of ointment, likely scented with spices as an aromatic perfume.
2. Crossing the social boundaries was taboo, particularly for one who was dishonored; the courage shown by the woman must have been driven by deep conviction.
3. Even today, the woman's actions would be deeply uncomfortable (7:38) and considered inappropriate in a public context, but Jesus ignores social breaches of etiquette in favor of responding to (accepting) the woman's sincere gratitude and love (7:47–48).
4. Though being invited to the house of an honored member of society was itself an honor, Simon's lack of hospitality (a cause for shame in the first-century world, see vv. 44–46) suggests some insincerity or ulterior motive in his invitation.