



Sinners, Pharisees and Plenty of Oil

TEXT
Luke 7:36–50

June 19, 2016 — Sermon by Rev. Hallie M. Hottle

I admit that, when we first looked at all the stories we'd be using for this sermon series, I looked at this one and I thought: "Oh, I hope I don't get that one."

Tears and oil and feet; kissing and weeping: It's a big mess of a story — too messy for a summer series about the table; too messy, until this week.

Just a week ago, I did not know how this text might speak to us this summer. But we live in a world where so much can change in a week. Now this story comes to me as a relief: this weeping woman, with enough tears to wash the feet of our Savior; Jesus' word of forgiveness, his pronouncement of peace — even Simon's reaction, the dividing line he creates, his terrible naming of this woman. I'm grateful for all of it this week.

It's a mess of a story. But this is a mess of a world.

It was exactly one year ago that I climbed into another pulpit, in another city. I stood silently and waited for our church bells to toll, ringing in solidarity with Mother Emmanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina. I wept in the pulpit that day, unable to voice our prayers for our friends in faith who were killed as they studied God's word.

I began my first Advent season as a pastor approaching the microphone of our Living Nativity, over the laughs of children dressed as angels and shepherds — and over the cries of adults who had just heard the news of Sandy Hook.

I left my last call with a sermon of thanksgiving and gratitude — and the names of those who were shot at San Bernardino.

And here we are again — this time losing children in their safe place in Orlando.

In my less than four years of ministry, I have stepped into a pulpit to pray the names of those who have died of gun violence enough times to make the soul weary with this practice.

And so this weeping woman is very real to me this week. This unnamed woman barges into this house, throws decency and order to the wind and falls at Jesus' feet, dousing him with her expensive oil, crying hard enough that her tears wash his feet, using her hair as a towel. She doesn't seem to notice or to care that this is the house of Simon, a Pharisee, a religious man who has invited Jesus to his house with guests that are now all watching this messy scene take place. She just needs to be near

Jesus. And the response of Simon to this mess that is taking place is painful and real.

He watches this scene unfold in front of him, and he thinks or speaks out loud to himself: "If this man were really a prophet, he would know the kind of woman this is, that she is a sinner." He gives her a name: sinner. And with that, he draws a line, divides, makes distance. And the line he draws, the distance he creates, isn't between him and this sinful woman. It's between himself and Christ.

The names and the distance are things we know too well. When we are faced with things we don't understand, things we don't like, our default position, the easy reaction, is to name them; to distance ourselves, allowing the blame to escape us. I suppose we've been doing it since the beginning — since Cain lifted his hand against Abel; since we were scattered at the Tower of Babel; since Pharisees denounced holy women as sinful.

And for as long as we've been creating divides, God has been entering into them.

"Cain, where is your brother?"

"Simon, I want to tell you something ..."

Jesus turns from this weeping woman to tell Simon a lesson.

It's more direct than most lessons Jesus teaches. He says there are two people with two debts. One debt is greater than the other; both are forgiven. Which person will love the forgiver more? Simon answers correctly: the one with a greater debt.

But Simon's success in answering is short-lived. Jesus turns towards the woman and begins pointing out all the things this woman has done since she entered the house — things Simon missed as he prepared the dinner; things rooted not in ritualistic hospitality, but in love.

"You gave me no water for my feet, but she bathed my feet with her tears. You gave me no kiss, but ... she has. You did not anoint my head ... but she has given me her greatest oil." This woman has been forgiven and has shown great love.

The Greek is strange here. We're not sure if he says the greater amount of forgiveness, the greater amount of love, or the greater the love, the greater forgiveness. Which one precedes is unclear. And I think the text might be intentional in this ambiguity — because what Jesus is teaching Simon is something more difficult than a transactional debt-forgiveness program. All have debt that is owed. All will be forgiven. And some have more debt than others; but still, all will be forgiven.

The forgiveness part is not up to us. Our love for Christ and our response to one another, that is up to us. He's not shaming Simon or saying this woman is better than he. But he is pointing out that he, Simon the Pharisee,

is no better than this woman he has called "sinner." He's forcing Simon to lean *into* this mess he is witnessing, not *away* from it.

And over and over again, we fail at this task. Even with Jesus sitting at the table, Simon reminds us it's easier to push away. It's easier to name the sin of the one who sits with us and excuse ourselves from the mess they create than to bridge our gaps and see the holy in one another.

And the distance we create between ourselves and others has real consequences. It's hard to hurt those we consider brothers and sisters and friends. It's easier to hurt those whom we name as sinners, those we consider less than us, those whose debts we believe are greater than ours and too great to be forgiven. It's easy to give names to racism, mental illness, terrorism. It's harder to lean into the greater problem of evil, to stay at the table when conversation is hard and face the reality that violence does not come to exist in a vacuum.

There is a call involved in following this Christ of ours. It means following him into the hard parts — the parts marred by messiness and riddled with brokenness. It means accepting the illogical forgiveness program the cross created, making all equal. It means entering the conversations and the places no one else wants to enter.

For me, a couple of years ago, that place was a village in northern Haiti. It was a trip born of a divided congregation. We had supported an orphanage and hospital in this village where some of our members were from

for many years, but fatigue sets in when your expectations have to do with you and all the good you will do, and not on God and all that God is doing. Half the congregation was tired. Half remained passionate. Both sides had marked a line. Both sides had chosen names: hopeless; lazy. And I learned quickly that if you ask a divided congregation to get on a plane, they'll quickly unite in their desire to tell you "no."

So I took a little group of willing people with me, which turned out to be children and parents. We flew over quickly and then began a 10-hour van ride, where we paused periodically for me to vomit and take more Dramamine, while we went up and down unpaved mountain roads.

We spent that week learning many things. We learned about dehydration; about mosquito bites that are dangerous; about what happens when you mistakenly use the wrong water for teeth-brushing. And we learned that God lives in this particular Haitian orphanage — perhaps others too, but this one for sure.

The only way for a child to enter this orphanage was through the hospital, having some kind of long-term ailment or injury that would prevent them from being able to live normally. And so these 90 children in this orphanage played basketball with missing limbs; raced their wheelchairs through gravel and rocks; carried the smallest who could not move themselves.

The director met us at the beginning of the week and explained all of this to us. And she told us, with a twinkle in her

eye, that the world thinks these are broken children, but really, they are holy. Just like that she named them, and we found her name to be true.

Never have I been to such a holy place. And never have I been to such a messy place. We remained covered in baby pee and poo all week. There is no stopping the sweat in such a place, and the 100 percent Deet bug spray burned our skin.

But all those messy things ended up feeling more like the water of baptism than anything else we'd ever experienced. And when we returned, the church's partnership with the village was renewed, under the leadership of a 12- and a 16-year-old.

That 16-year-old is now 18. She's been back three times. Children's lives have been saved through connections she created with doctors in Miami; older children have been given new purpose as she sells their art and helps them create business that will sustain the orphanage. And now she is about to leave with a full-ride scholarship to Dartmouth, where she wants to become a doctor, so she can do medical mission work. And I have no doubt that the world she leads us into will be better than the one we have handed her — because she has seen what it means to cross the line, to step into the divide, to explore the names God gives rather than the ones we give each other.

I wish the lines and divides that face us today could be solved with travel — even difficult travel. I wish Deet and baby poop were our biggest obstacles

in this coming season. I wish the names we've created could be changed with the hugs of holy children. But the trials we face now are more difficult than these. The divides we must rectify now involve aisles that have become very wide; and notions with deep roots and poisoned fruit; and even long looks in the mirror that are perhaps the hardest to do.

There are no simple answers or quick fixes for the divides that plague us, for the names we have created for one another. Last year we called it racism. Two years ago we called it mental illness. This week we call it terrorism. We name it all as hatred, but none of this excuses us from the reality that seeds of hatred do not grow on their own. And that's much harder to hear than labeling, and distancing ourselves.

Simon had this dinner. And there was nothing wrong with the dinner. He prepared the food. He invited Jesus. He had other guests at the table. But this woman came in and made a mess of the whole thing. The mess pointed out all the ways he had fallen short: how he prepared the meal with hospitality in mind, but had forgotten love; how he had forgotten the water and the oil and the kiss — all the things this woman remembered.

We know how he reacts in the moment. But we're not sure what he does the next time he has friends over for dinner. Does he remember the other things next time? Does he change his preparations to include the water and the oil and the kiss?

We don't know. But I hope so — because once a mess re-

veals the mistakes, you change some things. The quick reaction might be names and distance. But the next dinner party had better not be missing the water and the oil and the kiss. And if it is — if we're still missing the love — well, I'd think there's a chance Jesus isn't coming back to that dinner table.

This is the mess we are faced with. The love that Christ requires of us is hard, and it is active; and it involves leaning into the mess of the world, as the one we follow did in his life and in his death — leaning into the gaps, into the divides, into the difficult conversations that require us to do things that haven't been done before — because very seriously, in this time, our children's lives are at stake.

This will not be the last time I have to stand in a pulpit in the week following a mass shooting. And for that reality, I hope we weep with this woman today. She is modeling something for us that we must have, that we must find within ourselves in this season ahead. We must weep for the sin that is ours, the hatred that evil doesn't have a unique claim to. We must weep for those who have been lost, and for the reality that they will not be the last. And we must weep enough tears for love to be recognized, for change to be made, for the pronouncement of peace to occur.

For we have cried out, "How long, O Lord?" But I'm not sure we've listened to God crying back, "How long, my people? I've done the hard work, I have made a way for you, your debts are forgiven, I have bridged

the gaps, and still you struggle with one another. How long, my people, will you forget to love?"

For 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 me. You did not anoint my head with oil; she has anointed me with her best oil. You did all you were meant to do, but she has loved me.

I do hope that we choose love.

Let's pray: Holy God, help us to choose love — a love that is active and real and ferocious in the face of evil that seeks to hurt your children. Make our love brave. Make it durable. Make it yours. In the name of the Prince of Peace, we pray Amen.

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.