

**Series Title: “The Parables of Jesus: Provocations in Wisdom”**

**Sermon Title: “Sanitized Spirituality - The Parable of the Two Debtors”**

**Scripture Text: Luke 7:36-50 (NRSV)**

**August 18, 2019**

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<sup>36</sup> 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. <sup>37</sup> 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. <sup>38</sup> 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. <sup>39</sup> 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.” <sup>40</sup> Jesus spoke up and said to him, “Simon, I have something to say to you.” “Teacher,” he replied, “speak.” <sup>41</sup> “A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. <sup>42</sup> When they could not pay, he canceled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?” <sup>43</sup> Simon answered, “I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt.” And Jesus said to him, “You have judged rightly.” <sup>44</sup> Then turning toward the woman, he 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. <sup>45</sup> You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. <sup>46</sup> You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. <sup>47</sup> Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.” <sup>48</sup> Then he said to her, “Your sins are forgiven.” <sup>49</sup> But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, “Who is this who even forgives sins?” <sup>50</sup> And he said to the woman, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.”

**Opening:** This is a really uncomfortable story! There’s just no way around it. And if there’s one thing I’ve been taught to do with things that are uncomfortable, its find the nearest escape route! Am I right?! Be honest, who here has ever found themselves in an awkward situation, whether a conversation at work, or a family gathering, on the light rail, or maybe at a party, and literally scanned the room for the nearest exit? You’re like, I am out of here! Some of us have even made stuff up that we suddenly needed to attend to in order to exit the awkwardness. Right?! We do this!

OR maybe you're the kind of person who is paralyzed by awkwardness or discomfort, and you end up getting stuck being the last person in the room having to deal with whatever mess just spilled out in front of you? Anyone? You're not asking for it, you just aren't quick enough to escape!

How about this, are there any of you who like the mess? Who are like, oooh awkwardness, yes! Now things are getting interesting! Yeah, enneagram 8's.

**Transition to Text:** Well, today's text situates us right in the middle of what must have been an entirely awkward and uncomfortable experience for just about everyone, perhaps even Jesus. And, I want to do something that is a bit counterintuitive for most of us. Rather than looking for the quickest escape route, I want us to sit in the awkwardness and discomfort for a bit, in order to learn what it has to teach us, and pay attention to the invitation in that space.

**Imaginative Reading:** I want to invite you to imagine yourself for the next few minutes in the town of Nain, in the hill country of Galilee at the time of Jesus' ministry. Your town is about 14 kilometers (or a short day's walk) from Nazareth, where Jesus grew up, and where, if you recall, he was rejected and nearly thrown off a cliff. You hear that Jesus has come to your town, and that there's been quite a lot of buzz about him from the moment he entered. He is said to have performed healings. You even heard that he stopped a funeral procession en route and raised a young man from the dead. What do you make of all this? Are you skeptical? Hopeful? Curious?

There have been a lot of questions about Jesus in the circles you run in. But tonight, you find yourself in the home of Simon the Pharisee, who has invited Jesus over to share a meal. You enter the room and there he is! It's Jesus, this person who is at the center of such controversy, who is spoken of as both a prophet and a problem, a blasphemer, depending on who you talk to. How did you end up here? What got you in the door? And how do you feel about being in the same room with Jesus?

On the one hand, you have a front row seat to conversation with the person who has become the talk of the town, now you're on the inside! On the other hand, now you're on the inside, which might be a bit dangerous, might compromise your social position, which might be what got you a ticket to this meal in the first place!

Are you feeling excitement, or anxiety? Are you curious to find out for yourself what this guy is all about? Or are you nervous, and hedging your bets to make sure you don't end up on the wrong side of this controversial figure? (PAUSE) Whatever your feelings, you're here now, and the meal is about to begin. As you look across the room,

what do you wonder about Jesus? What do you hope might happen here? What do you fear?

As the meal begins, you suddenly realize you've got company. A woman has snuck in the back door, and she's not here to serve the meal. She's approaching Jesus, she seems to know him. You recognize her too. Let's just say you don't hold her in high regard, she has a bit of a reputation. As you see her approach Jesus, what do you feel your body do? Do you step in and keep her from getting close? Do you shuffle uncomfortably in your seat? Do you sit back and watch how he responds? I mean, this could be embarrassing for him, maybe even for you. To be safe, you do nothing, and the longer this goes on, the more stunned into silence you become.

She's down at his feet now, she's weeping. As she tends to Jesus, what is Jesus doing? Take a moment to look at the expression on Jesus' face as he turns toward her. (PAUSE) He sees you gazing at him, and he turns his face up to look at you. What do you see in his eyes, in his gaze? What is he inviting of you?

Now you smell the perfume. She's still sobbing, and pouring oil and perfume on his feet, and kissing them. I mean, this is a hot mess. The perfume, the sobbing, her lips all over his feet. What is going on here?! Who let this woman in in the first place, and why is Jesus letting her do all of this! What does this display of affection and intimacy bring up in you? Does it make you uncomfortable? Does it offend? What does it offend? (PAUSE) As this goes on, notice where your eyes are drawn? Do you turn away, or continue your gaze? To whom do you look to qualify your approval or disapproval?

You're not the only one uncomfortable now. Jesus senses the discomfort, thick as the perfume that fills the room, and cutting the tension as a knife, he speaks up.

"Simon, I have something to say to you... A certain moneylender had two debtors; one owed 2 years worth of wages, and the other two months worth. When they couldn't pay, he canceled the debts for both of them. Now, which of them will love him more?"

Well, that's obvious, you say to yourself, as Simon replies, "I suppose the one for whom the greater debt was cancelled." Jesus responds, "You have judged correctly," which is an interesting phrase, given that the room at this point is thick with judgement. Jesus then takes the entire construct of judgment, of measuring one's worthiness to turn the moment on its head.

"Do you see this woman?" He says, "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; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.”

As you listen along, how does this inversion of logic land with you? (PAUSE) Do Jesus' words heighten the offense? Or is there something stripped away? Do you feel angry or bare, maybe a strange mix of the two?

As Jesus turns again to the woman, he speaks words of forgiveness over her. In that tender moment, what words do you wish Jesus would speak over you? Imagine now that the room empties until it is just you and Jesus who remain. Knowing what you just witnessed, what do you long for from Jesus? (PAUSE)

**Pray:** Let's just sit in prayer for a moment as you invite God to speak over you whatever you need most right now, whether a word of forgiveness, or comfort, or maybe just, *"I see you"*. God knows our deepest longings better than we know ourselves, and so I invite you to simply take a few deep breaths and open yourself to receive, whether a word, or a sense of God's presence, or even just the gift of silence. (PAUSE)

Thanks for being willing to enter into the discomfort of that space with me.

**Reflections on Vulnerability:** I want to use the rest of my time to offer a few reflections on this parable as it relates to the topics of intimacy and vulnerability.

1. We are both wildly attracted to and wildly uncomfortable with intimacy. Why is that?
  - Kids reaction to Jenni and I kissing each other. Edwin's smirk followed by an "Eeewww, why do you do that?" There is a knowingness in children that actually finds safety in the vulnerability of intimacy. Of course, they still squirm when I try to kiss them, but I promise you that their psyches will be better equipped for having felt the uncomfortability of my affection than they would if I were to deny them that affection.
  - Our attraction and discomfort with intimacy is only exacerbated as adults. This is evidenced so many ways, but perhaps no more overtly than in the proliferation of pornography, which, at it's core is usually an attempt to meet an unmet desire for intimacy. Now, it doesn't work, but it is interesting that scientists talk about pornography as potentially addictive, in part because it actually simulates many of the hormonal and neurological effects produced in actual sexual encounters, but without the intimacy. So, much like alcoholism, it becomes a numbing

mechanism from the terrifying and sometimes heartbreaking reality of real intimacy, a way to, at least momentarily, get the feeling without the risk. The problem is that it actually diminishes our capacity for intimacy by contributing to the narratives of shame that keep us from embracing vulnerability.

- Real intimacy, whether in a friendship, in our vocational context, or in romantic relationships is terrifying precisely because it requires vulnerability! Who wants to do that? It's an entirely common human paradox, that we simultaneously want to be seen and don't want to be seen. That is the fruit of shame.

## 2. Shame seems to be the single most powerful force in the human psyche.

- Many of you have encountered the work of widely acclaimed author and speaker Dr. Brené Brown around the ideas of shame and vulnerability. In her book *Daring Greatly*, Brown says that, "Shame is the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging."<sup>1</sup>
- At first glance, this parable might seem like a reversal of the same old worthiness debate, and therefore, just shame rearranged. As in, "who is most worthy of God's love and forgiveness? Is it the one who keeps themselves pure, or the one who knows their need for God?" And yet, the parable actually doesn't say anything about the woman's worthiness or Simon's worthiness. In fact, God's love isn't really even the question on the table. Throughout the story, Jesus' posture toward both Simon and the woman is already acceptance and love, it is a given. He's not juxtaposing their worthiness, rather, he's using their own formula to turn the question from who is most worthy, to *who is most able to receive, and therefore participate in the lavish overflow of God's love, which is freely given!* This is not to shame Simon, but rather, to invite Simon in, that he might experience the love and intimacy that this woman has so earnestly demonstrated she already enjoys with Jesus. It actually levels the field.
- The kind of love and intimacy into which Jesus invites us is an inherently vulnerable endeavor. It asks us to shed our armor, to be willing to be seen in all of our pain and need, fears and failures, as well as our beauty, creativity and giftedness. But we have been encultured to see vulnerability as weakness. Brené Brown says that, "Vulnerability is the

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<sup>1</sup> Brené Brown, *Daring Greatly*, (New York: Gotham Books, 2012), p. 69.

last thing I want you to see in me, but the first thing I look for in you.”<sup>2</sup>  
Ouch!

- Author and poet, Mark Nepo says that, “One of the most painful barriers we can experience is the sense of isolation the modern world fosters, which can only be broken by our willingness to be held, by the quiet courage to allow our vulnerabilities to be seen. For as water fills a hole and as light fills the dark, *kindness wraps around what is soft, if what is soft can be seen.*”<sup>3</sup>
3. It’s never too late to leave the world of safe and sanitized spirituality, and to join in the messy, vulnerable, intimate dance of love!
- Notice that Luke leaves Simon’s story unfinished - this is unusual for Luke! He offers us no indication of how Simon responds to the parable, almost as if to say, the story isn’t finished, the invitation is open! And this leaves space for us, the reader, even 2000 years later to come to our own conclusion, to expand our welcome and follow the invitation into a more expansive experience of the love of God.
  - Once you understand that Jesus’ invitation is not a worthiness contest, or a contest in proving our love, rather, it is an invitation to freedom to participate in the lavish and outrageous flow of God’s love, you realize that the door is open, and that we have a choice! In fact, we have thousands of choices, almost every moment of every day.
  - We can either remain stuck in our cycles of control, perfectionism, shame, performance, addiction... whatever mechanism you use to keep yourself at a safe and sanitized distance from the gift of your own beautiful mess of a life, OR we can lean in, we can say YES to our lives, to the beautiful *and* broken parts. We can acknowledge the mess, and risk showing up! It’s uncomfortable space, but it is the space where love grows! Listen once more to Brené Brown, who says it so well;
 

“We cultivate love when we allow our most vulnerable and powerful selves to be deeply seen and known, and when we honor the spiritual connection that grows from that offering with trust, respect, kindness,

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<sup>2</sup> Brené Brown, *Daring Greatly*, (New York: Gotham Books, 2012), p. 113

<sup>3</sup> Mark Nepo, *The Book of Awakening: Having the Life you Want by Being Present to the Life You Have*, (San Francisco: Corani Press, 2000), Meditation for August 15.

and affection. Love is not something we give or get, it is something that we nurture and grow...”<sup>4</sup>

The question is, in which project would you rather participate? What is worth your life’s energy? If you’re consumed with measuring your own worthiness, you’ll invariably be consumed in measuring everyone else’s worthiness around you. How does that work out? In this uncomfortable scene in Simon’s house, Jesus exposes the fruit of the worthiness game, and reveals the supposedly “sinful woman” as the one who bears much love!

Think for a moment about those you have loved and those who have loved you most deeply and transformatively. What are the places where love has grown in you? Would you characterize love as safe, predictable, and measured, or as risky, vulnerable, and unexpected?

The invitation to love is an inherently vulnerable endeavor, and today’s parable invites us to consider not so much the question of our sincerity or worthiness in love, but rather the question of *engagement*. Will we, like the woman in the parable, risk touching the heart of love at the center of our own vulnerability, fear, and even failure? Or will we maintain our “healthy” distance? Will we open ourselves to the lavish and unexpected nature of love, or will we armor ourselves with our abilities, accomplishments, self-consciousness and control? Will we join the intimate dance, or maintain a sanitized spirituality that protects us from the potential pain, messiness, and vulnerability of love? The invitation is ours, the story is unfinished.

**Pray:** For a moment, just receive and enjoy the truth that your belovedness, your worthiness as a child of God is already a given! You don’t need to prove or accomplish anything. Given that truth, invite God to show you where you’re being invited to show up to your own life, to receive and participate in the lavish flow of God’s love?! Amen.

**Benediction:** As you go into this week, may you allow your most vulnerable and powerful selves to be deeply seen and known. And may you honor the intimacy of love that grows from that offering with trust, respect, kindness, and affection, both in yourself, in those you love, and in the One in whom your belovedness is already a given! Go in peace!

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<sup>4</sup> Brené Brown, *Daring Greatly*, (New York: Gotham Books, 2012), p. 113