

Luke 7:36-50 — The Anointing

Bible Study for General Synod 2017 — Thursday Morning

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Narrative context

The story of the woman who anoints Jesus' feet occurs in the context of his Galilean ministry. Luke has followed the Gospel of Mark up to Luke 6:16 and now adds a section of his own from Luke 6:17 to 8:3. In the lead-up to our passage, this added section includes the Sermon on the Plain (6:20-49), two miracles stories (7:1-17), the anxious questioning of John the Baptist (7:18-23), and Jesus' defense of John (7:24-35).

The verse immediately before the anointing is particularly significant for our passage. Jesus says, 'wisdom is vindicated by all her children'. Our story presents the woman as one of 'wisdom's children' who (like John the Baptist) validates the ministry of Jesus, the Wisdom of God.

Following our story, Luke describes the Galilean women disciples who follow Jesus to Jerusalem and minister to him from their means (8:1-3).

Gospel comparison

We need to observe, however, that the Gospels present us with three different stories of anointing.

The first is the story in Mark and Matthew, which is set in the house of 'Simon the leper' (Mk 14:3-9/Matt 26:6-13). There an unnamed woman, who is *not* a sinner, anoints Jesus' *head* at the beginning of the Passion narrative. In doing so she recognises Jesus' kingship and his approaching death.

The second is our story today, which is not connected to Jesus' death, is an anointing of his *feet*, and is carried out by an unnamed women who is described as a 'sinner'.

The third story is that of Mary of Bethany in the Gospel of John, a known and loved disciple of Jesus who anoints his *feet* immediately following the raising of Lazarus (Jn 12:1-8). She does so in an act of devotion and gratitude, as well as recognition of Jesus' impending death.

Note that none of these women, in any of the three accounts, is identified with Mary Magdalene who is named as a woman healed by Jesus of demon-possession (Lk 8:2) but whose main role in the Gospels is as the witness to Jesus' death, burial and resurrection (Mk 15:47-16:8/Jn 19:25, 20:1-18).

Structure

Our story can be divided into five sections and is structured in a circular pattern (technically called a 'chiasm'):

I. Setting: at table with Jesus	7:36	A
II. 'Intrusion' of <i>woman</i>	7:37-38	B
• alabaster jar (37)		
• tears, kiss, oil (38)		
III. Challenge to SIMON	7:39-43	C

- shocked response (39)
- Parable of 2 Debtors (40-43)

IV. Hospitality of *woman* 7:44-47 **B¹**

- water, kisses, oil (44-46)
- forgiveness (47)

V. Conclusion: at table with Jesus 7:48-50 **A¹**

- word of forgiveness (48)
- who is this? (49)
- word of peace (50)

I. Setting: At Table with Jesus (36) **A**

The context is a banquet in the style of the Greco-Roman world: most likely an all-male event, with men reclining on couches (without sandals) around a low, horse-shoe table. The main point at such banquets was not just the food and drink, but also the conversation which was expected to be lively and stimulating. Outsiders might come in and sit around the walls to listen to the discussion.

Luke's Gospel, however, also has a particular focus on Jesus' table fellowship. Jesus' ministry in this Gospel revolves around prayer and table. He is ready to share fellowship with all kinds of people in an inclusive and embracing way (e.g. Lk 14:1-24), and is continually at prayer (e.g. Lk 6:12; 9:28) — as is the church in the Book of Acts (Acts 1:14; 12:12). In his table sharing, Jesus draws people into intimate communion and covenant with God.

II. Intrusion of Woman (37-38) **B**

The woman now intrudes into the banquet scene. She is simply described as a 'sinner', which means that her lifestyle has placed her outside the Law and the people of God, the covenant community. She may well be a prostitute — which might explain her unconventional behaviour, especially in letting down her hair. However, Luke never specifies the exact nature of her sinfulness. What matters is not the nature of her sin but the fact that she is a representative of sinners in Luke's Gospel — outsiders, who are profoundly drawn to Jesus and his liberating message. By contrast, the upright and law-abiding insiders become increasingly alienated from him. The contrast between these two groups stands at the heart of the story.

In the iconography of the scene, Luke depicts the woman as standing beside Jesus, not rolling around under the table as much Western art presents her. There is a poignancy as well as power in her actions, expressed in the overflow of her feelings. She wets Jesus' feet with her tears, she dries them with her long hair, she continually kisses his feet, and finally she pours expensive, perfumed oil over them.

This is not just the result of feeling, however but is also a thoughtful and premeditated action. While the woman's tears may express penitence, they are chiefly the result of gratitude for a forgiveness already bestowed, as Jesus later tells Simon: 'her sins *have been* forgiven' (v. 47). Luke implies that the woman has *already* encountered Jesus before the banquet. In this sense, what she does in weeping over him and anointing his feet is a profound act of worship.

III. Challenge to Simon (39-43) **C**

Simon feels moral outrage at the woman's actions. But his real disapproval is directed at Jesus himself for allowing such a person to touch him. As a sinner, the woman is ritually unclean and therefore

polluting of those who come into contact with her. From Simon's point of view she is morally contagious, yet Jesus seems unaware of that.

Here Simon is not just expressing his own views, but also those of his world. Jesus risks losing honour by his contact with the woman, exposing himself to public shame. Though Simon clearly has respect for Jesus, he also finds him incomprehensible. His narrow and judgemental value-system leads him to question Jesus's identity as a prophet. But, in fact, Jesus's prophetic abilities enable him, not to reject the woman as unclean, but rather to discern Simon's innermost thoughts.

The Parable of the Two Debtors is the key to the story. It is told with minimal details: the creditor, the two debtors, the contrast in the amounts each owes, and the cancelling of both debts. Jesus challenges Simon with the question of comparative love. Which of the two debtors will love the creditor more: the one who owed \$5,000 or the one who owed \$50,000?

The parable shows how Jesus has interpreted the anointing. This story-within-the-story presents the divine perspective on the woman and her actions. She is not an intruder after all, nor is she shaming Jesus or making him unclean. On the contrary, in the eyes of God, she is demonstrating an exemplary love and adoration of him.

IV. Hospitality of Woman (44-47) **B¹**

Jesus continues the conversation with Simon, turning to the woman and pointing the 'moral' with devastating frankness. The language of debts and forgiveness in the parable moves to that of host and hospitality. Jesus draws a sharp contrast between the woman's actions and those of Simon:

- a) Jesus' feet have been washed: not by the host, but by the unclean outsider.
- b) Jesus has been given a kiss of warmth and welcome: not by the host, but by the outsider.
- c) Jesus has been anointed with oil: not by the host, but by the outsider.

In each case, what the woman gives is extravagant: far more than the most generous host would give. Ironically, the woman takes over the role of host from Simon. For all his righteousness, Simon fails to show much hospitality, which is provided instead by the 'sinner'. The presenting issue, as Luke sees it, is in the different degrees of love. Simon is exposed for meagre 'love', if love it can be called, while the woman is commended for the deep devotion of the true disciple. The language of degrees of love and depth of sin is deeply ironical, however: in the end the rejection of divine grace (the real sin) lies not with the outsider, the sinner, but with the insider, the righteous one.

V. Conclusion: At Table with Jesus (48-50) **A¹**

Jesus now addresses the woman for the first time in the narrative, thus implicitly drawing her into the inner circle of the banquet. He treats her as an honoured guest by speaking to her directly. He assures her of forgiveness and publicly confirms her new status as an insider, no longer a 'sinner': 'your sins have been forgiven,' he says.

The guests are astonished at Jesus for assuming such authority. They raise sharply the question of his identity, not in a spirit of openness and worship as the woman does, but cynically and with closed heart.

Jesus' final words are an affirmation of the power of the woman's faith: '*your* faith has saved you'. The woman's dignity is here restored, as is also her honour and status. The restoration takes place in the

public forum where women have little freedom of access. Thus while forgiveness is the work of God in Jesus (vv 48-49), the woman's actions symbolise a corresponding faith.

Jesus concludes by bestowing on the woman the gift of *shalom*, the blessing of salvation. The irony is that the final words of benediction are given not to Simon the host but to the woman with her faith and true hospitality. This is characteristic of Luke's theme of reversal and overturning, as exemplified in the Magnificat (Lk 1:46-55). Simon's response (like that of the older brother in the parable of the Prodigal Son, Lk 15:11-32) is not recorded; we do not know whether he accepts or rejects Jesus' challenge.

The pronouncement of salvation brings the narrative to its climax and gives Jesus the last and most powerful word.

Theology

This is clearly a story of love and gratitude, of forgiveness and reconciliation, of hope and new life. It contrasts the self-righteous, mean-spirited insider with the self-aware and generous-spirited outsider. In defending the woman, Jesus relocates his identity from the centre (the guests) to the periphery (the intruder). He establishes communion with her, at risk of creating distance from Simon. His divine authority steps over the invisible but impassable boundaries between righteous and sinful, male and female, insider and outcast, clean and unclean.

But this is equally a story of hospitality, with the irony of the outsider offering what the insider, the host, does not. The anointing signifies both the worship and the servanthood which lie at the heart of the gospel, illustrated in the next passage by the ministry of the Galilean women. The sinful woman shows an exemplary grasp of Jesus' identity and mission, and ends up ministering to him in an act of worship, a ministry he graciously accepts. She shows us where true discipleship begins: in turning to Christ with open-hearted gratitude, love and worship.

In the end, Jesus' acceptance of the woman and her hospitality flows from the prior hospitality of God, which Jesus himself uniquely embodies: a ministry of word and deed, forgiveness and hope, suffering and death, resurrection and new life.