

Sermon preached by Pastor Ben Kuerth on January 25<sup>th</sup>, 2016 at Victory of the Lamb on Luke 7:36-50.

**Series: All Things New**  
**Today's Focus: New Love**

**“We Are Free To Love Greatly”**

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

There is a verse in the Bible that says, *“Where sin increased, grace increased all the more”* (Romans 5:20). We see this grace, this undeserved love, in action especially in the gospel of Luke as we follow Jesus around. If we imagine Luke as a videographer following Jesus around with a camera, Luke’s unedited footage would show Jesus reaching out with mercy and grace to the brokenhearted like that widow we heard about last week whose only son had died. We’d see the amazing grace he showed towards the bent over and the hurting, the sick, the forgotten people on the fringes of society, social outcasts and notorious sinners.

And you might think, “Well it’s Jesus of course, this is so wonderful, this grace, it’s just what I would expect.” Except that it wasn’t at all expected by everyone in Jesus’ day. And it wasn’t all considered wonderful by everyone either. I wonder what you or I might have thought hanging around Jesus and hearing him speak. How critical would we have been of him? How quick to judge his motives and his actions? How fast would our minds be formulating an email intending to “help him” with our “constructive criticism”? It actually makes me a little unsettled to think what Jesus would say if he were to come into our church today and preach. Where would I find myself in his sermon? What would he say to me? What would he say to you?

Because what’s amazing to me is that often at the same time as we see Jesus reaching out to the irreligious sinners, we also hear him reaching out to the religious crowd too—both the leaders and the laymen—calling them to repentance also. Luke’s gospel in particular shows the tremendous love that Jesus has for all those who are lost—it’s just that there are different ways to be lost. You can be lost in your smug self-righteous pride looking down on others from up on your pedestal just as much as you can be lost if you’re trapped down in the filthy pit of sin and defiantly set against the will of God. So search your heart, friends, as you listen to this story from Luke’s gospel. There’s plenty of room for all of us here to find ourselves in this story. Where do you find yourself today?

<sup>36</sup> *When one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him, he went to the Pharisee’s house and reclined at the table.* <sup>37</sup> *A woman in that town who lived a sinful life learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee’s house, so she came there with an alabaster jar of perfume.* <sup>38</sup> *As she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them.* [Do you sense the outrage brewing in the room? This woman being called a “sinner” was likely promiscuous, probably a prostitute. Onlookers could surmise where she got the money to buy this expensive perfume and what she had previously used it for.]

<sup>39</sup> *When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, “If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is—that she is a sinner.”*

<sup>40</sup> *Jesus answered him, “Simon, I have something to tell you.”*

*“Tell me, teacher,” he said. [He probably expects an explanation is coming]*

<sup>41</sup> *“Two people owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. <sup>42</sup> Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he forgave the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?”*

<sup>43</sup> *Simon replied, “I suppose the one who had the bigger debt forgiven.” [It’s like he knows intellectually what he’s supposed to say but he’s a bit cautious because he’s not yet sure where this conversation is going.]*

*“You have judged correctly,” Jesus said.*

<sup>44</sup> *Then he turned toward the woman and said to Simon, “Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. <sup>45</sup> You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. <sup>46</sup> You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet. <sup>47</sup> Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—as her great love has shown. But whoever has been forgiven little loves little.”*

<sup>48</sup> *Then Jesus said to her, “Your sins are forgiven.”*

<sup>49</sup> *The other guests began to say among themselves, “Who is this who even forgives sins?”*

<sup>50</sup> *Jesus said to the woman, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.”*

So there are two main characters in this story, right? First there’s Simon the Pharisee. It’s his house. And then there’s this unnamed woman described twice though simply as a “sinner”. And here she is making a scene in Simon the Pharisee’s house. Scandalously she touches Jesus who is reclining at the dinner table. And then she wipes her tears on his feet with her unfastened hair. And there sits Simon the Pharisee, probably a little in shock. But he doesn’t say anything right away because he is wondering, “Let’s just see what Jesus is going to do about this.” And what Simon the Pharisee expects Jesus to do is to make this woman pay. That’s what he would do.

“She thinks she can just barge into a Pharisee’s house and make his guests ceremonially unclean by touching them? Disgusting! Surely a man who represents God would call her out for this. Surely her sins are a heaping pile in the sigh of God. Somebody here’s going to have to tell her it’s time to square up or at least give her a good long scowl.” Some people you know are really good at the scowl thing and when others see it, they feel it as criticism and condemnation. I’m guilty of this too and at times haven’t even

been aware of it. So just some quick advice. It might be a good idea to ask a close friend if your body language or facial expressions tend more to be encouraging or criticizing because sometimes (and we may not even intend this) but what's in our heart leaks out with our face.

Yet what does Jesus do here? There's no scowl. No shaking his head. No harsh words or sarcastic comments. No such thing. Instead Jesus accepts this woman's actions as reverent and appropriate even though according to the technicalities of the rules if a ceremonially clean person was touched by someone who was unclean they would be unable to enter the temple area, celebrate festivals, or offer sacrifices. In other words Jesus was willing to become unclean himself in order to ultimately help this woman have a clear conscience. (Do you not see how Jesus was also willing to do just this very thing for us too at the cross?) Jesus didn't judge her actions as inappropriate because he recognized them as true worship—the outpouring of a contrite heart, truly sorry for her sins, crushed by the weight of her regret and shame, and knowing there was nothing she could do to get out from under the burden of guilt but to Jesus in faith.

You ever feel like this? Does God's law ever strike your heart so that you feel like coming apart at the seams when you think of the mistakes you've made? The sins you've committed? The people you've hurt with your words, your criticism, your scowls, or fists? Well friends I want to share a Bible verse with you here today to take to heart. It goes like this, Psalm 56:8. *Record my lament; list my tears on your scroll--are they not in your record?* You see, friends they are in God's record just like this woman in the story who cried at the feet of Jesus. Because even when you're crushed under such a weight that all you can do is cry out to God...He truly does care. Your Heavenly Father invites you to pour out your heart to Him and know that He loves you. He keeps track of your tears. He hears your prayers. They matter to Him. He longs to mend your broken heart with the message of His unconditional love and forgiveness displayed in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

And so the moment of truth comes. Jesus finally opens his mouth. *"Simon, I have something to tell you." "Tell me, teacher," he said.*<sup>41</sup> *"Two people owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty."*<sup>42</sup> *Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he forgave the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?"*<sup>43</sup> *Simon replied, "I suppose the one who had the bigger debt forgiven."* *"You have judged correctly," Jesus said.*

You can just imagine the look on Simon's face as it starts to dawn on him what this means. Like, "Oh yeah, there were two people in the story who owed money. There are two people in this room that Jesus is talking about. Hmm...me (he's talking to me) ...and her. And what did Jesus say? *'Two people owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. Neither of them had the money to pay him back.*'

Friends, which of these debtors are you? Of course it should be obvious that it doesn't really matter right now, does it? It might make you feel better to compare yourself to someone else (the more notorious a sinner the better as if "at least I'm not like Bill Cosby") but it won't do you any good. Because before God by nature we've all got a sin debt we cannot pay. Some of you have tried. Maybe

for some time you've been kind of thinking you've been doing a pretty decent job of paying down your sin debt...thinking it's probably not that big to begin with. But that's crazy. I mean there are 10 commandments. But you honestly think you've even kept the first? Can you even name the first? "You shall have no other gods." Have you really loved God above all things—money, family, health, leisure, fun—and done it thoroughly, perfectly, consistently? I haven't. The truth is we've all fallen short. And not just a little short. *Immeasurably* short. So listen to what Jesus says, "*Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so... he forgave the debts of both.*"

Now wait a second? Scandalous, right? I mean to Simon the Pharisee it seemed scandalous first of all that Jesus would tolerate *her* behavior—what with all the touching and tears and anointing with oil. But then Jesus takes it up a notch and says, "*Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven.*"

Friends, sometimes it just needs to be said that even if you've racked up what feels like an insurmountable mountain of shame and regret due to your sins, even if you've ruined the best thing in your life because of your sin, even if you've been hypocritically putting yourself in the place of God judging others, you can find peace and together we can be set free to love each other greatly. How?

Because even though you and I could never pay the debt of sin we owe to God, that's what Jesus Christ came to do and did. In our place Jesus went out of his way to settle our account with the Almighty God. In doing so he perfectly obeyed every commandment thoroughly and consistently. Then in our place he took responsibility for our sins and paid our debt. On the cross he paid it all in full. He proved it by rising from the dead just as he predicted. He distributes this forgiveness freely through his word and sacraments received by Spirit given faith.

"Jesus paid it all. All to him I owe. Sin has left a crimson stain. He washed it white as snow." We'll sing that as our final song today and if in doing so you shed a few tears of gratitude for God's grace you have absolutely nothing to be ashamed of. Jesus is making all things new. Through the Gospel he turns our tears of guilt into tears of gratitude. And he frees us to love greatly.

The sinful woman in our story never found true love by going from one man's arms to the next. She only found it, once and for all, at Jesus' feet. In that humble posture and place, there she found forgiveness. And in the peace of such great forgiveness she was set free to love greatly. So too when we come humbly to the foot of the cross of Jesus, with a broken and contrite heart, we will find divine mercy and grace through the forgiveness Jesus earned.

What then might great love look like in your life... Towards God? Toward your spouse? Your kids? Your co-workers? Your church family, neighbors, and friends? What would change in your life if you believed you were set free to love greatly? What grudges, attitudes, and judgments would have to melt away? I can't wait for you to find out. Friends, Jesus Christ has saved you. Go in peace. You are free now to love greatly! Amen.

## My Next Steps

**A Thought to Ponder:** Even though you and I could never pay the debt of sin we owe to God, that's what Jesus came to do...and did! This truth should keep me humble. This truth should make me grateful. This truth sets me free to love greatly.

**A Treasure to Share:** *"Record my lament; list my tears on your scroll--are they not in your record?"*  
(Psalm 56:8)

Even when you feel all alone, broken down by life, or crushed by guilt...there is Someone who cares—Your Heavenly Father! He invites you to pour out your heart to Him and know that He loves you. He sees your tears. He hears your prayers. They *matter*. He longs to mend your broken heart with the message of His unconditional love and forgiveness displayed at the cross of Christ.

**A Challenge for the Week:** What might great love look like in your life... Towards God? Toward your spouse? Your kids? Your Co-workers? Your church family, neighbors, and friends? What would change if you believed you were set free to love greatly? Hint: What grudges, attitudes, and judgments would have to go away?