

AN AUTHENTIC ENCOUNTER WITH GOD

Luke 7:36-50

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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. {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. Then she continued 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." {40} Jesus spoke up and said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." "Teacher," he replied, "Speak." {41} "A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. {42} When they could not pay, he canceled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?" {43} Simon answered, "I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt." And Jesus said to him, "You have judged rightly." {44} 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. {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 sins, which were many, 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} And he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace" (Luke 7:36-50 NRSV).

INTRODUCTION

The adult son of my next door neighbor in Iowa came up to me all excited. He told me that he had been through a life changing experience. He said that he was happier than he had ever been before and he had found purpose, meaning and direction for his life. I asked him what was the basis for this new found joy. He said, "Vitamins!" And not just any vitamins but a particular brand of vitamins which he proceeded to try to sell me. His life changing experience lasted about a week.

Do you know of someone like that? Have you met people who claim to have discovered some new source of happiness for themselves and who then they try to convince you to buy in on the idea and then if you happen to run into them again a few months later, well, its like it never happened?

There are many religious experiences like that. I know of a woman who was involved in a horrendous car accident. She told me that through that experience she found God. She said she was certain there was a God, and she almost sounded like Mother Theresa as she described her thoughts and feelings. I ran into her again about a year later, but God was no longer even in the picture.

It would be easy to become cynical after hearing such stories. We may well ask, are there any life changing experiences that last? The Good News is that because of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we know that the answer is an emphatic “YES.” A genuine experience of being changed by the grace of God lasts forever. But how do we measure the genuineness of such an experience?

To try to answer that question I want to talk about an incident that took place in the ministry of Jesus as recorded for us in the seventh chapter of Luke -- A strange woman encounters a gracious God in a most unlikely place. And in the process of looking at this story perhaps we, also, shall have such an encounter.

I. THE OBJECT OF OUR TRUST

Jesus was invited to the home of Simon the Pharisee. The Pharisees were a strict religious party who were often in conflict with Jesus. But Jesus did not shun the Pharisees. He accepted this invitation to have dinner with Simon. In those days, wealthy families had square shaped homes that were open in the center to create a courtyard where people ate meals during warm weather. They did not sit but reclined. They used something like a couch and lay on their left sides, with their bare feet facing away from the table, and they would have used their right hands to eat. This would be uncomfortable for most people today. The obvious exception being teenagers who can eat in almost any conceivable position, even those that seem to defy the laws of physics.

Roads were dusty and because people wore sandals, their feet naturally got dirty. A gracious host would provide water for the guests to wash their feet. If a respected rabbi came then the host did this chore himself. He would also provide some olive oil to freshen the skin and some fragrance to overcome any unpleasant odors.

If townspeople heard that a visiting rabbi had come then they would gather around the courtyard in order to catch pearls of wisdom from his teaching. The destitute would also

gather hoping for crumbs from the table.

I want you to picture this scene in your minds so that it will be easier for you to understand what happened after Jesus arrived for the meal. The fact that a woman was standing near the feet of Jesus would not have been at all unusual. What was unusual was that she was weeping and her tears fell on Jesus' feet. She then used her hair to wipe his feet. In order to do this her hair had to have been loosened. This was considered a shameful act, as no respectable Jewish woman would be seen with her hair down in public. But this woman didn't care about that. Her consuming desire was for Jesus. So she wiped his feet and then, maybe impulsively, maybe without thinking she began to kiss his feet. She took an alabaster jar, or more accurately, a small alabaster phial attached to her necklace containing an expensive perfumed ointment and anointed Jesus' feet. The ointment would have been potent enough that even in the out of doors, all the guests would have sensed its aroma. As Luke tells this story, he is deliberately contrasting the woman and Simon. The woman did for Jesus everything Simon should have done for Jesus and then some.

So why did Simon invite Jesus in the first place? I can think of three possible reasons:

- 1) Simon wanted to become friends with Jesus. After all, not all Pharisees hated Jesus. Some even became his disciples. But the whole atmosphere here is one of aloofness if not discourtesy so this seems an unlikely reason.
- 2) Simon was an enemy and wanted to trap Jesus or hold something over him. But there is no evidence for this. There are no trick questions, and Simon does call Jesus "Teacher," a sign of respect.
- 3) Simon was one of those who collects experiences with people, especially celebrities. I have a dear friend who collects stuff from celebrities. He has all kinds of autographs, pictures and memorabilia from numerous celebrities. He is not friends with these people. He just has all this stuff. Maybe Simon was like that. He did not hate Jesus. He did not love Jesus. He was simply patronizing him.

Contrast that with the woman who knew nothing but love for Jesus. Then ask yourself, "Am I more like Simon or more like the woman?" If you want help answering the question, simply check your attitude. Do you love Jesus? Or do you simply patronize him because he is part of the trappings of this religion we call Christianity?

The experience of grace is measured by the object of our trust. Doubtless you have heard

the expression, “It does not matter what you believe as long as you are sincere.” A lot of people hold to this notion. But if you examine the statement, it is nonsensical. Of course, it matters what you believe. I may sincerely believe I can fly but if I step off a tall building, all the sincerity in the world will not circumvent gravity. Shorten my inseam, yes, but give me wings, no. I may sincerely believe that eating jalapeno peppers will give me peace with God but if I eat a pound and a half of peppers all the sincerity in the world will not circumvent the gastronomical processes. Give me heartburn, yes, but the peace which surpasses all understanding, no.

Simon did not trust in Christ but himself. He looked to his own righteousness to hold him in the good with God. The woman, on the other hand, placed her trust in Jesus Christ. Christ was the one who could offer her grace. He was the one who could forgive her. He was the one who could give her eternal life. As a result, the woman had a genuine experience of grace. For it does matter in whom you place your trust.

“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God-- not the result of works, so that no one may boast” (Eph 2:8-9 NRSV).

II. THE DEPTH OF OUR NEED

Meanwhile, Simon was looking at this rather outlandish scenario with this apparently immoral woman tenderly touching the feet of his guest. He wasn't sure what to make of it so he said to himself, “You know, if Jesus were a prophet he would know that this is an immoral woman and he would forbid her from touching him but obviously he doesn't know so he must not be a prophet.”

The irony is that Jesus is a prophet (and more than a prophet) and not only does he know about the woman, he knows about Simon! Later, the words Jesus used reveal that he knew what Simon was thinking and it must have been disconcerting to Simon to know that his thoughts were so transparent. So Jesus knew the woman. He knew Simon. He knows you and me!

Jesus told a story. He told about two debtors: one who owed the equivalent of two months wages and the other owed the equivalent of two years wages. They could not pay and the creditor cancelled both debts. Jesus then asked, “Now which of them will love him more?” Simon gave the answer that would later indict him, “The one who had the greater debt.” Simon soon discovered that Jesus was not talking about two men who owed money. Rather, he was talking about Simon and the woman. Both were in debt to God but only the woman was aware of the greatness of that debt whereas Simon had little or no awareness.

People will not seek a doctor if they do not think they have need. People will not seek a Savior unless they are aware of their need. Awareness of need is a second way to measure the genuineness of an experience of grace. How great is your need for God?

III. THE NATURE OF OUR RESPONSE

Some translations have Jesus referring to the woman and saying something like, "Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven--for she loved much" (Luke 7:47 NIV). This implies that the woman was forgiven because of her love, as if she earned it. But in fact, the original makes it clear that just the opposite is meant. Her love was a response to being forgiven. And because she was so aware of how much she had been forgiven, her love was proportionately great. This is yet a third way to measure the genuineness of an experience of grace. Do we respond with love?

"In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another" (1 John 4:10-11 NRSV).

If you want to measure the genuineness of your experience then look at your response of love. Do you come away from the experience as a more loving person?

CONCLUSION

The absence of love suggests an ignorance of need. The ignorance of need suggests the lack of trust. A genuine encounter with God will be marked by a real trust in Christ, a real awareness of need, and a real love for others.

Peter Bohler once asked John Wesley the founder of Methodism, "Do you know that Christ died for your sins? Wesley said, "I know that Christ died for the sins of the world. Bohler said, "That is not what I asked. I asked do you know that Christ died for your sins? Wesley could not answer and so turned away with tears in his eyes. At that point in his life, he did not know. Of course, later in his life that changed and he did know. And so can you. You can have a genuine experience of grace and know that Christ died for you. Place your trust in Jesus Christ. Consider how great is your need for God's mercy. Allow the Holy Spirit to fill you with a grateful love for others.