

I spoke with a young man at Starbucks who told me that all he knew about Christianity was the Christmas story and the Easter story—Jesus’ birth, death and resurrection—but nothing in between. “I’ve always wondered if there was more to it,” he said.

Indeed, Jesus’ work between Christmas and Easter is rich. The stories in the Gospels help us to connect the great events of his ministry with our faith. For in them we see our Savior’s heart. This morning I want to talk about Christ’s heart for us and what this has to do with our walk with God and with one another

OPENING PRAYER

LUKE 7:36-50

One of the Pharisees asked him to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and reclined at table. ³⁷ And behold, a woman of the city, who was a sinner, when she learned that he was reclining at table in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster flask of ointment, ³⁸ and standing behind him at his feet, weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears and wiped them with the hair of her head and kissed his feet and anointed them with the ointment. ³⁹ Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, “If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner.” ⁴⁰ And Jesus answering said to him, “Simon, I have something to say to you.” And he answered, “Say it, Teacher.”

⁴¹ “A certain moneylender had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. ⁴² When they could not pay, he cancelled the debt of both. Now which of them will love him more?” ⁴³ Simon answered, “The one, I suppose, for whom he cancelled the larger debt.” And he 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 wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. ⁴⁵ You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss 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 are many, are forgiven—for she

loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little.”⁴⁸ And he said to her, “Your sins are forgiven.”⁴⁹ Then those who were at table with him began to say among^{la} themselves, “Who is this, who even forgives sins?”⁵⁰ And he said to the woman, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.”

We read in the Gospel: **Luke 7:36, “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.”**

Jesus hung out with the working folks, he debated with the intelligentsia, and he went one-on-one with the demon-possessed and the devil himself. And he even he ate dinner with a Pharisee!

As we'll see in a moment the Pharisee's dinner invitation to Jesus was not exactly innocent. But Jesus knew what he was walking into. But he feared nothing. He walked into all kinds of trouble all the time as if to say, “You want a piece of this? Okay, let's go!” Jesus wanted everyone to know him for who and what he was and to have the opportunity to choose for themselves who he was to them.

We read, **Luke 7:37-38, “a woman of the city, who was a sinner, when she learned that he was reclining at table in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster flask of ointment,³⁸ and standing behind him at his feet, weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears and wiped them with the hair of her head and kissed his feet and anointed them with the ointment.”**

“**A woman of the city, who was a sinner**” was a euphemism for a prostitute. So how did this woman get into the Pharisee's house? The Pharisee, whose name is Simon, as we learn later, was a rabbi. In the day, when a rabbi entertained, people were free to come and go from his home. It was free food for them, and the rabbi had the opportunity to recruit new followers. That's how the prostitute got in the door.

Picture the occasion of the dinner like this: In the center of the dining area the food was set on the floor on platters. Everyone laid on cushions on his left side in a circle around the food, giving him freedom of movement with his right hand for taking food from the platters. From above, the arrangement would've looked like

a radiating star. Thus when the prostitute was **“standing behind (Jesus) at his feet,”** she was standing along the outside ring of the circle.

We read that she had an **“alabaster flask of ointment.”** It was customary that a Jewish woman carried around her neck a little vial of concentrated perfume in what was called an alabaster.

So the prostitute had been listening to Jesus speak over the previous days and weeks, and his words spoke to her heart. Perhaps she had heard him preach the Beatitudes: **“Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.... Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh. Blessed are you when people hate you and when they exclude you and revile you and spurn your name as evil, on account of the Son of Man!” (Luke 6:20ff)**

I’m sure the woman had heard the Lord say many other things as well, words of hope, of peace, and of forgiveness. Yes, especially forgiveness. And she heard these words with her heart, and she owned them.

So the woman knelt behind Jesus, and she cried. Her tears were tears of sorrow mixed with tears of joy, and they fell on Jesus’ feet. Her hair flowed freely, a terribly immodest thing in the day. But she didn’t care, and she wiped her tears from Jesus’ feet with her hair. And then she took her most costly possession, her perfume in the alabaster, and she poured it on his feet, anointing him with her love as her Savior. For he had saved her life by giving her his heart with his words, giving her a reason to live.

We read, **Luke 7:39, “Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, “If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner.”**

Simon the Pharisee believed that his power, affluence, and smarts were signs of God’s favor, and so it was impossible for him to connect what he was hearing with his heart; and it was impossible for him to accept the gracious, redemptive message the prostitute and all the other people who followed Jesus had been receiving.

So Jesus appealed to Simon the Pharisee and the others who were present with an analogy. It was a very simple message: **Luke 7:41-43: “(Jesus said), a certain moneylender had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. ⁴² When they could not pay, he cancelled the debt of both. Now which of them will love him more?” ⁴³ Simon answered, “The one, I suppose, for whom he cancelled the larger debt.” And he said to him, “You have judged rightly.”**

Unlike a parable, an analogy does not have several layers of meaning. Rather, there’s only one possible interpretation, and Simon walked right into it!

There were 3-things which a host always did for a guest in ancient Israel. First, the host would touch the shoulder of his guest and then kiss his cheek. This was a sign of peace. Next, he would pour cool water over his guest’s sandaled feet, washing the dirt off them, an empathetic gesture of welcome. And finally, the host would place a drop of rose-oil on his guest’s head as a symbol of refreshment. But Simon the Pharisee didn’t do any of these things for Jesus.

I’m sure the other dinner guests noticed this lack of hospitality and anticipated a conflict from the very beginning! Indeed, they got to watch it unfold:

We read, Luke 7:44-47, [Jesus] said to Simon, “Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. ⁴⁵ You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss 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 are many, are forgiven, for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little.”

What Jesus said about the prostitute was that she loved him for everything he stood for, and that she treated him with hospitality, welcoming him into her life. And it’s no surprise. For she had experienced his compassion first hand. Jesus had healed her in her heart.

We read, Luke 7:48-50, “(Jesus) said to (the woman), “Your sins are forgiven.” ⁴⁹ Then those who were at 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.”

The woman knew her sin and she did not deny it. And for this reason Jesus was able to forgive her. He said, **“her sins which are many are forgiven.”** And she loved him.

But Simon the Pharisee did not see himself as a sinner. He had drawn a line in the sand: Over there are the sinners, but over here are the good people, the people who have dedicated themselves to the things of God, people like me!

However, when a person sees himself for what he truly is, that is, a poor miserable sinner, and when he sees in Jesus God’s love and forgiveness of sins, then he is filled with hope, peace, and forgiveness. But if there is no confession of sins, there can be no forgiveness.

In one fell swoop Jesus expelled the myth that there is anything in heaven or on earth that can separate a person from the love of God. The prostitute had faith and she was saved. Jesus did not give her a single condition for receiving God’s love. He did not tell her to get her house in order or that she had to be rehabilitated before she would be considered worthy of God’s love.

St. Paul confirmed this Good News in his letter to the Galatians when he said, **“...we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified” (Galatians 2:16b).**

When the prostitute touched Jesus with her hair, her tears, her perfume, and with her faith, she didn’t become perfect. Rather, she was enveloped in the life of the one who is perfect, Jesus Christ. And he revealed what his life was all about when he accepted her and said the words, **“Your faith has saved you; go in peace.”**

What the Lord wants is a relationship, a confession, a devotion to his Son, the one who loved us so much that he sacrificed himself on the Cross on our behalf.

As we walk with our Lord in this faith the burdens of the day, the troubles of the world, the turmoil in our families, and our aches and pains become mere shadows in the light of God’s glory, and the words of Jesus to the prostitute become our own: **“Your faith has saved you; go in peace.”**

When we let go of our need to be in control, to fix everyone and everything; when we stop playing God, the words of Jesus to the prostitute become our own: **“Your faith has saved you; go in peace.”**

When we rest in the Lord and let his peace roll over us like water, washing away our doubts, our fears, our sense of hopelessness; when we believe that our Lord has received us as his children, as heirs of his Kingdom, the words of Jesus to the prostitute have become our own: **“Your faith has saved you; go in peace.”**

Friends in Christ, this week as you read in your Bibles the stories of Christ’s ministry between Christmas and Easter may they become your stories, stories about how he comes to you every day to reveal how much he loves you.

This week may the words of Jesus fill you with confidence, that you may know in your heart how much he loves you, that he accepts you as you are not as you should be.

And this week may you have the opportunity to share this Good News with another person who really needs to hear it, in the name of Jesus. Amen.