



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

April 17, 2016

"Grace Alone" (Encounters with Jesus Series) - Luke 7:36-50

The Rev. Steve Peich

Have you ever done something for which you felt like you could never be forgiven? I have had several of those things in my life. Unfortunately, I've had more than a few of them. But one kind that stands out among others and it was something that I had put out of my mind for a while. That is, until I was back home in Jersey last Fall.

It started about the time I was eight years old. During that time we attended an Eastern Orthodox church in New York City. Each time we went my mom would give me 25 or 50 cents to put in the offering plate. Now because this plate was made of brass, every time I put money into it, it would clang.

It made me feel good because then everyone knew I was giving money to the church. Moreover, and more importantly, the clanging noise assured my mother I gave the money to the church and did not keep it for myself.

But then one day it hit me. Every week all kinds of money was floating by me; money that could buy me lots of candy after church. And this is where the unforgivable dawned on me. I figured out how to make the clanging sound in the brass plate so my mother would think that I gave money, but also palmed some money in the offering plate as I took my hand away from it.

Yes, that's right, the Rev. Steve Peich at eight years old...ripping off God!!! I wish I could tell you I did it only once. (Now you know why that in the three decades of my ministry I've never been asked to help collect the offering at church).

Let's face it, when we hear of such crummy and sinful behavior it gets a little hard to see that person with grace, even with an eight-year-old. I mean stealing money from God?! Who's got grace for that?

Today as we continue in our series "Encounters with Jesus", we are going to look at a fascinating scenario where Jesus interacts with two kinds of folks who need a lot of grace. Our text today is found in Luke 7:36-50, but before we read it let me give you a little context to the passage so we can better follow it.

On this occasion a Pharisee, named Simon, invites Jesus to come to his house for a meal. But it is not just a casual meal. It's more of a small banquet kind of thing. In those days it was considered virtuous to invite a respected teacher for dinner, especially if the teacher was from out of town or had just taught at the synagogue.

After the meal, the special

guest would be asked to teach or share some thoughts, usually on some moral instruction. This then would stimulate conversation and feedback from the other invited guests at the banquet and all would have a great time.

What was interesting about this banquet was that the "moral instruction" was not exactly what the hosts of the banquet may have been expecting. In fact, it all goes haywire when a prostitute walks in.

Luke 7.36-50 - ³⁶ Now one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him, so he went to the Pharisee's house and reclined 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 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."

40 Jesus answered him, “Simon, I have something to tell you.” “Tell me, teacher,” he said.

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

⁴³ Simon replied, “I suppose the one who had the bigger debt canceled.” “You have judged correctly,” Jesus said.

⁴⁴ Then he turned toward the woman and said to Simon, “Do you see this woman? I came into your house and you did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. ⁴⁵ You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. ⁴⁶ You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet.

⁴⁷ Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many have been forgiven—hence, she has shown great love. But he who has been forgiven little loves little.”

⁴⁸ Then Jesus said to her, “Your sins are forgiven.” ⁴⁹ The other guests began to say among themselves, “Who is this who even forgives sins?” ⁵⁰ Jesus said to the woman, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.”

Let’s go over this whole scene in slow motion and see the amazing things going on here. Let me fill in some background here so we understand the impact of this story.

At the meal (verse 36) it says that Jesus “reclined” at the table. This was a typical eating posture at a banquet of this type. In such a

set-up they would be using couches rather than chairs. These couches were assembled in a U-shape. Those around the U-shape would have had one arm on the cushion and would use the other arm to reach for the food. They would also have their feet away from the table toward the wall. This is why this woman is doing all that she does at Jesus’ feet.

Now there is something else we need to understand about first century meals and Pharisees to appreciate this scenario. The word Pharisee means, “Separate one”; separated in the sense of being separate from sinful ways and sinful people. You see, the Pharisees longed for the time when all of Israel would live into a high state of holiness. They felt that their identity as a people and future as a nation depended on living holy lives.

This is why a real priority for Pharisees was the issue of purity—ritual purity and moral purity. They considered impurity like a communicable disease. They thought that if you hung out with the IM-pure your life would become contaminated with or get impacted by their junk. Pure and pious people are only to hang with other pure and pious people.

Furthermore, the Pharisees regarded their dining tables at home as representations of the God’s altar in the Temple in Jerusalem. This made meal time a sacred event. This, of course, also led to a special focus on the purity of one’s companions at every meal.

This thinking also made meals a means of social stratification. Only social equals would be allowed to dine with them. Remember back in Jr. High when the “cool kids” had their own table

in the cafeteria? And no one was allowed to sit there without *their* say so...because they were only going to have “social equals” eat at their table. Well, the Pharisees did this in a big way.

One of the points I want to make with this cultural information is that Simon and his friends saw Jesus as a holy and pious person—worthy of some honor and distinction.

But I also share this information because it helps us understand why Jesus’ affirming treatment of this woman is no small thing. He’s not just being a nice guy here, but is intentional about *raising her status* in the community. He is saying that she too, though sinful, can take her place among the pious and the holy. I’m not sure I can do justice to just how incredible this move is in that context.

Now notice how this woman is twice referred to as being a sinner (verses 37, 39). The word “sinner” wasn’t just a person who made some mistakes here or there or “cussed a little too much.”

To a first century Jew the word referred to the low-lifes and riff raff, the disreputable and the damned. When it referred to women, it mostly likely implied she was a prostitute. Now being a prostitute made her not only immoral but ritually unclean.

This is why we see the Pharisees remark about how Jesus should not be allowing such a lowly person to do such things. She was ruining Jesus’ holiness and basically ending the banquet.

Now I have to admit, given the cultural standards of the day, this scene does look a little dicey.

Adult women who were religious were expected to have their heads covered in public. Any woman who exposed her hair like she did, to public view, would be considered promiscuous.

Moreover, Jewish people did not normally consider perfume sinful. However, because this woman is a prostitute, and uses her perfume as a tool of her trade, Jesus' acceptance of the gift of perfume is more than a little scandalous.

So again, given the cultural context, this is all a little dicey. Now you may not think you would be like the Pharisees and be so judgmental about Jesus. But let me put it like this. Perhaps it would be like if you saw me talking to a prostitute in Waikiki. We are both laughing and smiling with each other, and we even give each other a hug.

Would you say, "Wow, isn't that great? Steve is reaching out to the lost!" Or would you think, "Wow, Steve is lost!"

Now this woman is no saint, I assure you. Selling your God-imagined body for money was no small error. And Jesus never plays this down in order to love on and be gracious to her. He admits that "her sins are many" (verse 47). However, He just never lets *even many sins* get in the way of His compassion.

And that makes me wonder if I do. In other words, do I talk and act in such a way about and among the "sinful" that would cause them to feel anything less than loved? Do I say and do things where they feel grace from me? Whether the "them" were a prostitute, an addict, a homeless person, a homosexual, or a Muslim?

When I look at this passage, I am reminded of Jesus' words in a sermon He gave where He talked about loving all kinds of people even the not so lovable people. In Luke 6 Jesus is teaching about loving your enemies and in this discourse He gives the reason why.

Luke 6.35 – "*Love your enemy*"... "*because (God) is gracious to the ungrateful and the wicked.*"

The question is, "Can we do the same?" And if not, as Christians, why not? After all, this is the directive and model of Jesus Christ. What's the cost relationally, communally, socially, etc. if we cannot? What is the cost to the mission of First Prez if we cannot live into this?

I would love to tell you that I have always lived into such great things, but I haven't. About 20 years ago we lived next door to a woman whom I suspected was engaged in a sinful lifestyle. One time I was talking to my wife about that aspect of her. The thing is, I said it in a somewhat sarcastic and derisive manner.

Now houses were so close to each other in that neighborhood I'm pretty sure she heard me, because from that day forward that neighbor never spoke with me again. I deeply regret that incident. Not simply because I was "found out," but because it was so unChrist-like. Who am I to do that? To be so derisive, about someone God loves so much? And what is really sad is that I didn't have the guts to apologize.

Back to our story. Let's stop for a moment and enter into this woman's life for a minute. What was it like to be her before she heard Jesus' message of forgiveness, love, and grace?

What's it like when you know what you do is *absolutely against* God's law and purposes? What's it like when you know *everyone* in your town, even those who pay you, see you as lowly, marginal, and even disgusting? How do you think she sees herself? What is her sense of self-worth?

And perhaps most importantly, how do you think she thinks God sees her?

What kind of identity over time would be etched into the deep recesses of her soul when she would see in people's eyes, or hear in their words: "Disgusting, Unholy, Unworthy, Rejected and Condemned by God." Can you imagine if that was your core belief?

Today we would summarize such feelings as shame. One of the key features that fuels the sense and feelings of shame is having an internalized sense of being unworthy of the acceptance and love. Shame is that gnawing feeling that you are not worthy of love and connection *unless* you *do* something or *have* something or *look like* something "worth loving."

People with shame have a deep core belief that they are defective, deficient, or inadequate in some way. They are not good enough, rejectable, and in a sense, unlovable. Do you know people who feel such things? Do you have these feelings this morning?

How many of us walk around with a constant and nagging feeling of, "I'm still not good enough." You are plagued with the feeling that, "You're no one until you are able to achieve more, or hit a home run in everything you do, or when everyone thinks your awesome and likes you, etc.?"

Jean Vanier, founder of The Ark communities, which are homes for handicapped, said something very interesting a while back. He noted that the great struggle of the mentally disabled is not just their handicap, but more often, it is with feelings of rejection.

He says this: "I have discovered that even though a person may have severe brain damage, that is not the source of his or her greatest pain. The greatest pain is rejection, the feeling that nobody really wants you *'like that.'* The feeling that you are seen as ugly, dirty, a burden, of no value. This is the pain I have discovered in the hearts of our people."

I think this pain could be discovered in the hearts of a lot of people who are not handicapped. Is it in your heart this morning?

You may be surprised to hear this, but I have long struggled with an internal core belief of shame. If you knew how I grew up you may understand why. Let me give you just one example.

As I alluded to before, I was raised Eastern Orthodox as a child, but I never really took to the faith. When I was a college student I finally gave my life to Christ and in the process became a Protestant. When my mother found out she cried. A couple of years later when I entered the ministry, she became furious.

I was home for a brief while before leaving for Southeast Asia to work as a missionary in a refugee camp. During that time my mother told me never to answer the phone. She didn't want her friends asking me what I was now doing with my life. To her it was disgusting.

A week later she told me they were going to have about 25 of

their friends over for an all-night dinner party. So she told me to make sure I wasn't home when they came.

So I spent that evening in a Jersey diner and came home about 1:00 a.m. Here I was, a full grown man, literally crawling on my hands and knees to get into the home I grew up as a kid—just to be sure no one else would see me; all because someone could not accept me *like that*.

So yes, I know what it is like to have people look at me and not want me "like that." It's taken me years to overcome the narrative that at least some part of me is "shameful".

So imagine what's it like to one day for this "shameful woman" to run into a "Holy Man" who says that she is passionately loved by God—and worth everything; that her sin has never, nor will ever, affect her worth as God's beloved child.

Don't get me wrong, this "holy man" has made it clear that sin matters; that it does indeed have a direct and real affect on our relationship with God and other people, and that repentance is absolutely necessary. But He also makes it clear that no matter how sinful we are, we remain the great desire of His heart. And that He is relentless in the pursuit of bringing us back into relationship with Him.

In all likelihood this message was something she had *never* heard before. And more importantly, it was certainly never felt before from the eyes or the words of any man. What must that have been like to experience this from Jesus?

Then somewhere along the

line she responds to His offer for redemption and a new life. And with as much as she knows how she embraces Jesus' new label of her, His new identity for her, "Forgiven and Beloved Daughter of God." Imagine how her soul felt its worth...and how shame lost its grip.

To walk around with a sense of unworthiness is no small thing and Jesus knows this. This is why a big part of Jesus great healing ministry is not simply to heal disease, but it is to help the soul find its worth.

Have you found yours through the indestructible worth that *God* gives? Or are you still trying to find it from fleeting and shifting forms of worth the World gives? Achievements, Possessions, Education, Good Looks, etc. If you are caught up in this, let me just ask you, how's that working for you?

This leads me to make a very important point. In the minds of the Pharisees and many moralists today, worth is connected to actions. I'm here to tell you all that is completely bogus. Worth is only connected to the heart of God.

And what we see in Jesus displayed constantly throughout the Gospels is this: Sin never lessens our worth in the heart of God. *Never*. This gives us great hope for redemption, even for the worst of us. No matter how far we have moved from God's intentions for our lives, we have not moved one inch from His love and value of us.

Bottom Line: Sinful does *not* equal worthless; and by the same token, which few of us really grasp, being moral does not equal worthy. And Jesus is about to teach this little lesson in spades.

Let's read again what Jesus said. ⁴⁰ Jesus answered him, "Simon, I have something to tell you." "Tell me, teacher," he said. ⁴¹ "Two men owed money to a certain money-lender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. ⁴² neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he canceled the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?" ⁴³ Simon replied, "I suppose the one who had the bigger debt canceled." "You have judged correctly," Jesus said.

There is a lot to draw from this parable, but I only have time to make some quick observations.

First, a denarii was a Roman coin. In that era one denarii was a day's pay for a laborer. 50 denarii was about a month and a half of wages to the average guy. 500 denarii was about a year and a half's wages—in other words, huge!

Now what does a 500 denarii debtor have in common with a 50 denarii one? Both are in a debt that that they cannot pay back, and both need to have a debt wiped out and forgiven by grace alone.

In fact, the word "canceled" here in verse 43 is in the original language of the New Testament, a form of the word for grace. They needed their debts, *graced*. So again, the point is, be it a big debtor or mini-debtor—both needed grace.

Which brings me to the Pharisees and why they needed grace. If you recall, Jesus is quite blunt in His comparison of the woman's treatment of Him and Simon's treatment of Him.

Remember Jesus says, "You didn't greet me with a kiss, but *she* did...*you* didn't wash my feet, but *she* did, etc." Why is Jesus making this an issue?

You see in these days, customs of hospitality required at least several things to happen especially with an invited guest at something like a banquet. Upon arrival to the house there would have been a kiss of greeting on the face of the guest.

After this, the guest would have been seated on a stool and provided water to wash their hands and feet and given oil to put on their dry skin. Only then could the blessing on the meal be offered, and only after these things could people recline and start the meal.

These glaring omissions reveal something crucial about Simon and his friends. Remember I said before that by hosting a banquet like this Simon is looking at Jesus as a holy man—that's why Jesus can eat with Simon.

And he also esteems Jesus enough as a teacher that he feels Jesus is a guy worth hearing from—someone worthy of honor. In fact, some words in this passage seem to indicate that Simon may have been thinking that Jesus was indeed some sort of prophet, which is no small view of someone in the first century.

However, as great as these views are of Jesus, there is a big problem. They honor Jesus so far, but no farther. And this is a big part of why they too are sinners in need of grace.

You see Jesus is fully devoted and committed to them, but they are responding to *His* devotion, love, and honor *toward them* with a "this far and no farther" kind of response.

Can anyone relate to that? I will honor Jesus with *some* of my

life, or even *much* of my life, but not necessarily with *all* of my life.

Here's the deal, folks. The main question in life with God is not are you good or bad? Or did you steal money from church? Or that you have never stolen a thing in your life. The main question with God is, "Do you love Jesus with *all* your heart, soul, mind and strength? Do you honor Him in *all* that you are and in *all* that you do?"

That's the main question because that's the main question in any committed relationship. It's not about some sort of moral balancing scale, but it's all about commitment.

Just like it is the main question in a marriage. What if you honor your spouse in some things but not in all things? If you live in a marriage with a "this far...but no farther" approach? How does that go for your relationship?

When I give wedding vows I don't say to the couple, "Do you Bob, pretty much take Alice to be your wife? Do you promise to honor her, more or less, on most days?" Why do those vows sound ridiculous? Because we all know to have a healthy, strong, and vibrant marriage you *have to be* ALL in. 50% in doesn't cut it; nor does 75, 90, or even 99% cut it.

Imagine saying to your future spouse, "Honey, for 364 days a year I will be fully yours, but just one little day I won't be. But hey, that's less than 1% of the whole year!! In fact, I think it comes out to about 0.3% of the year. That means I'm going to honor you 99.7% of the time!! Surely that must be good enough to please anyone and to have a healthy relationship! Amen?"

What if I up the ante to just one hour in a year? There is 8,760 hours to each year. What if I said, “Honey I will honor and be faithful to you every hour but one.”

That’s only .01% of the year. That means I’m going to honor you 99.99% of the time!!” If that’s not good enough honor and faithfulness in a marriage, what is?

Anyone buying this math? As we all know even that microscopic amount of unfaithfulness and a lack of honor to the marriage bond shatters *everything* relationally. It’s simply the nature of relationships.

And you wouldn’t care if I spend the rest of my life curing AIDS, rescuing people from human trafficking, or building homeless shelters throughout Hawaii. You know that my “good works” will never make up for that one hour of dishonor to my spouse.

But sometimes that’s exactly how we think with God. “Yeah, God, I haven’t always been honorable and faithful to you, but hey, I gave some money to the poor. Or, “at least I never _____.” (you fill in the blank).

If life were like a “morality test” getting 99.99% would be an “A”, passing the exam by a mile. But life with God is not like a morality test; it’s like a marriage—a committed relationship. And in such things we can now see that 99.99% is not passing. In fact, it’s utter failure.

And that is why when it comes to relational sin, it is can never be balanced out by doing good moral things. The only way such a rift gets healed is that the offended one gives grace. I’ve done a lot of marriage counseling over the years and I can assure you, such situations are only healed by grace alone.

So as we close can I ask you to reflect for a moment about where *you* are really at in your relationship with Jesus? Are you some of the way there? Most of the way there? Or even 99.99% of the way there? Or are you all in?

Who is Jesus to you? A prophet, a great teacher, a holy person? Or God and Savior? Is He the center and circumference of *all* you are and *all* you do? Is today the day where you end your “fuzzy

commitment” to Jesus, and say, “Okay, Lord, here’s my life, my WHOLE life. It’s Yours.”

Is today the day where you wrap your arms fully around the grace God has for you and allow Him to shatter completely the shame of your life by His unbreakable love for you?

Please know this my friends, God loves you where you at—not where you are supposed to be. Yes, He wants you to repent, but He loves you no less.

Is this day, *The* day, where you fully embrace the unassailable worth that is yours through Christ? What do *you need* today from Jesus?

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Note: Sermon texts are also available at fpchawaii.org. The audio version can be downloaded from iTunes. You may also request the audio version by visiting: fpchkoolau@gmail.com