

## Knowing the Cost

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Luke 7:36-8:3

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I feel like I learned this story by heart as an adolescent. Upon reflection, the tale of the sinful woman and the rude Pharisee is less fitting for a child than, say, Jonah and the whale, or Noah's ark—but maybe not by much.

My mother kept the collected works of the gospel heavyweights, the Winans family, in her car for the whole of my childhood. But she had a particular affinity for CeCe Winans' 1999 release, *Alabaster Box*. The whole album is solid, but the title track was always my favorite.

At some point, my mom gave me her copy of the CD, and to this day I keep it in my car. So when I started working on this sermon, I naturally put this song on Repeat. After all, there have been fantastic feminist, theological critiques of this book of the gospel, but when you have a great contemporary Christian album, you just can't let that go to waste.

The lines I struggled with as a kid, and I think are worth struggling with today, go like this:

*"Don't be angry if I wash his feet with my tears and dry them with my hair.*

*You don't know the cost of the oil in my alabaster box."*

Anger? It's a good thing, if not a little excessive, to wipe someone's dirty feet with your hair. Right? But somebody is angry, namely Simon. Simon the Pharisee invited Jesus to dinner for Simon's sake. This gathering was for Simon's uplift. It was about bolstering Simon's reputation, and putting on display his unwavering adherence to societal expectations.

And then this woman shows up. A woman interchangeably called "immoral" and "sinful" comes in Simon's house and offers a level of hospitality Simon didn't even think to give. And Simon is furious. In the version of the Bible I read from most often, it says that Simon spoke to himself saying: "If this man were really a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman was touching him."

But I think that verse 39 of the New Living Translation really gets it right. It reads instead, "Jesus is no prophet."

That's perhaps a little more than anger. Simon finds this woman and the way she serves Christ so revolting that he questions Jesus' mission, calling, very divinity.

To be fair to Simon, it wasn't as if his reaction was out of step with the culture. Women in general were treated with disdain, and this woman is by all the clues and coded language a sex worker, a prostitute. And she breaks more than a few rules of appropriate behavior in this interaction with Jesus. She takes down her hair in front of strange men, she touches this man she barely knows, and she comes into Simon's house uninvited.

Simon is thinking what everyone else in the room is thinking—and what many people think today: Sex work is immoral, it isn't an honest living, and the people who do this work are degenerates. If we didn't think like this, why when describing how accepting Christ was do we focus on the fact that he hung out with prostitutes and not Pharisees? In my opinion, it took a lot more benevolence to hang out with Simon than this woman, who appropriately treats Christ as the Son of God.

But the truth is, we are still much more likely to lock up a sex worker than to question the structural oppression that creates the market for sex work. We're still thinking Simon's thoughts. So what happens next in this story was revolutionary then and still would be today.

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Christ turns to Simon and asks him a question about debt in the form of this parable: "A certain moneylender had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he cancelled the debt of both. Now which of them will love him more?"

Simon answers that it would be the debtor who had the larger debt cancelled. This question and the answer are a lesson, sure, but more of an indictment. An indictment for what Simon has failed to do in the course of the evening, and for what Simon will fail to understand for the rest of his life.

Christ also asks this question of Simon: "Do you see this woman?" He doesn't wait for Simon's answer because, of course, the answer is no. Jesus spends so much of the gospel coddling and calling out supposedly righteous people for what they don't see and don't understand. And here we are again.

In fact, in verse 31, right before this story, Jesus, exasperated, asks, "To what shall I compare this generation?" He chooses ungrateful children. "I play the flute and you don't dance. I play a dirge and you don't weep. John came eating bugs dipped in honey, and that was too crazy for you. And now I am here eating your food, and I am a glutton. You are never satisfied. You never see things as they really are."

Back to the debt. Jesus lays out the debt that Simon has acquired for the evening: "You gave me no water for my feet. You gave me no kiss. You did not anoint my head with oil."

See, Simon offered the invitation, presumably with the crowds of Jesus' followers looking on. He got credit for inviting The Teacher to dinner. And then when Jesus came in his house, in the presence of fewer people—people Simon has already proven himself to—Simon doesn't care for Christ. Because that part of the ritual of hospitality is about the guest and his needs.

So this woman steps in. She pays Simon's debt, a couple times over. Instead of water, she uses her own tears. Instead of a towel, her hair. Instead of one kiss for the cheek, a hundred for the feet. And instead of the readily available olive oil, a sweet-smelling perfume. What initially seems like excess is really just enough. Her act of love isn't just for Christ. It's also for Simon.

It's a theme for Christians, right? Instead of one big memorable Last Supper, we do it all the time...seemingly over the top, but really just sustenance.

After further reflection, the only action that seemed out of place, a little extreme, was the kissing of the feet. Until I learned that during this time, kissing someone's feet was an admission that that person had saved your very life. I don't mean a spiritual soul saving, I mean a pull-you-from-the-brink-of-physical-death sort of saving. And I think this woman was in need of both varieties.

Can you imagine being stuck in a job, a life, that is deemed valueless—worse yet, despicable and damned? Can you imagine the erasure of your existence by a whole culture because you are doing what you have to do to survive? And all the while you know nothing is going to change. This is the card you have been dealt. And now, after what you've done, who would want you?

And then one day, someone comes to you and says The Teacher Jesus has preached against men leaving their wives penniless and homeless for no reason (which is what divorce looked like in that day).

Jesus travels with women, heals women, listens to women...women who do what you do. There is a prophet who is set on upending oppression and offering you liberation from this patriarchy, this rape culture, this rich-first/poor-last dichotomy. A place has already been set for you at the table. The kin-dom is open to you. There are people rising up who are for you. The children of God are for you. God is for you.

I think very few of us know what it's like to be pulled back from the brink by the teachings of The Great Liberator. So we can't really know what it cost her to get to this kind of faith, love. But we do know that she had almost nothing when she met Christ, and she is going to give up everything she has left to follow him.

This is expensive discipleship. This woman knows about cost. She shows us that in the way she ministers to Christ's needs.

In fact, the actual phrase in verse 48 is past tense. The correct translation is not "Your sins are forgiven"; it is "Your sins have been forgiven." The acts of that evening didn't buy her forgiveness. She did that out of great love. When she kneeled behind Christ in the Pharisee's house, she was already free. She has been saved in every imaginable way.

And Simon, Simon is never going to know the marginalization that brought her to that kind of salvation. So his discipleship is going to be cheaper, and his love will be lacking. But that's okay. Simon is at the center, not on the margins. He has his rules, his house, his parties, his reputation, and a culture that loves him as much as he loves it.

To break this story down for us, in case we missed the point in chapter 7, Luke begins chapter 8 this way:

*Soon afterward he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. And the twelve were with him, and also some women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Chuza, Herod's household manager, and Susanna, and many others who provided for them out of their means.*

Mary Magdalene, a woman who also knows about cost. A woman healed of a very large number of demons. Joanna, a rich woman whose husband is in Herod's service. And Susanna.

Lots of folks have assumed that the woman in the previous story was Mary. But a common literary device of this period was to tell a story about someone and then list them last in the next passage. We can assume that the previous tale is about Susanna, so we have learned, in detail, about the "evil spirits" she was released from.

Isn't it fitting that the twelve don't have their debts enumerated here? Right after Christ says that it is only those who have been forgiven much who will love much. The disciples, who are certainly of their generation, who are satisfied by nothing and love so failingly—Luke doesn't mention one thing for which they have been forgiven. This is an upside-down kin-dom moment, if ever there was one. Luke tells us that the women get it, and the disciples, well...they showed up. In fact, not only do the women get it, they also understand the fiscal cost of the mission and they finance it.

So maybe Cece Winans is right. We may never know the cost of the oil in the alabaster box. But we also don't have to settle for the approach Simon models.

After all, Simon could have quenched his anger and stepped back in awe. He could have answered the question "Do you see this woman?" with an enthusiastic yes and carried on his life accordingly. He could

have pledged his allegiance to the man born to offer sight to the blind and liberty to the captive and renounced the culture bent on stripping the very least of their remaining dignity.

We have that option, too. And the option to be a little more like the woman: to do what others deem excessive and break the rules of propriety in the name of loving more and wholly following the subversive message of Christ.

Perhaps if we do these things, we will be a little closer to knowing the cost.

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