

She Loved Much

Luke 7:36-50

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Today is Mother's Day. My brother Barry ambushed me not too long ago. He was going through some pictures. My dad used to keep boxes and boxes of slides, and my brother was going through some of those old slides and he found a picture with me in it. I was about five years old. We had a piñata in our back yard. Someone is blindfolded and taking a hearty swing trying to break the piñata and release all the hidden treasures inside. I can't tell if it is my brother Barry swinging, but it is definitely me with a bag waiting anxiously for the piñata to be cracked open. I know it is me because I am wearing the old boots my mom so graciously bought for me after I begged and pleaded for months on end to have a pair. It is a picture of good times. My Uncle Leon and Aunt Polly are in the picture. Knowing they had come to visit means it was a special time...their presence, along with the girls Pam, Peggy, and Lois, our favorite cousins, well, between my cousins, Uncle Leon and Aunt Polly, a piñata...and my prized boots, well, it couldn't help but be a special time. But after I smiled and got that warm fuzzy feeling of a beautiful memory, a cloud passed over my heart. In the picture was my mom, as a young woman, in her mid-thirties. Beautiful. Vibrant. Healthy. Happy. It is both bitter and sweet to wish Happy Mother's Day when that mother is no longer young, no longer vibrant, in fact no longer living. Thankfully it is not only bitter, it is also sweet. It is so sweet and such a gift to have been loved by one such as her. That picture and the celebration of Mother's Day today brought to mind a poem.

Somebody's Mother

The woman was old and ragged and gray
And bend with the chill of the winter's day.
The street was wet with a recent snow
And the woman's feet were aged and slow
She stood at a crossing and waited long,
Alone, uncared for, amid the throng
Of human beings who passed her by
Nor heed the glance of her anxious eye.
Down the street, with laughter and shout,
Glad in the freedom of "school let out,"
Came the boys like a flock of sheep,
Hailing the snow piled white and deep.
Past the woman so old and gray
Hastened the children on their way.
Nor offered a helping hand to her—
So meek, so timid, afraid to stir

Les the carriage wheels or the horses' feet
Should crowd her down in the slippery street.
At last came one of the merry troop,
The gayest laddie of all the group;
He paused beside her and whispered low,
"I'll help you cross, if you wish to go."
Her aged hand on his strong young arm
She placed, and so, without hurt or hard,
He guided the trembling feet along,
Proud that his own were firm and strong.
Then back again to his friend he went,
His young heart happy and well content.
"She's somebody's mother, boys, you know,
For all she's aged and poor and slow,
And I hope some fellow will lend a hand
To help my mother, you understand,
If ever she's poor and old and gray,
When her own dear boy is far away."
And "somebody's mother" bowed low her head
In her home that night, and the prayer she said
Was, "God be kind to the noble boy,
Who is somebody's son, and pride and joy."

—Mary Dow Brine

I like this poem a lot. A gay laddie sees an old woman not as an old woman alone, uncared for, amid the throng. The boy sees her as "Somebody's mother." And in a wonderful turn that same old woman who is "Somebody's mother" sees the rambunctious young boy not just as a bundle of energy, she sees him as "Somebody's son...and pride and joy." I think you can see why I like this poem a lot here on Mother's Day.

I also like this poem a lot as it relates to the scripture before us from Luke chapter 7. This passage focuses our attention on a woman. I don't know that she was a mother. We are not told that information. But she was definitely a woman. And because she was a woman that means she was a daughter. This woman was somebody's daughter. But that is not how people saw her. The people of the town did not see her as somebody's daughter. Simon the Pharisee whose home she entered definitely did not see her as somebody's daughter. Simon saw her as an unwelcome visitor. Simon saw her as someone who had failed, and failed miserably. Simon saw her as someone whose life was filled with shame. Simon saw her and Simon judged her. He judged her critically. He judged her harshly. He judged her and in his mind declared she was not worthy. What is heartbreaking about this story in Luke 7 is that Simon the Pharisee and the people of the town might not be the only ones who saw this woman as a person of shame. If enough people in town say something about

you, and if the religious leaders say something about you, and if they say it often enough, you might begin to believe it yourself. It is heartbreaking to think the woman in the story might have come to see herself as a person who was shameful, who was a failure, who was unworthy.

But no matter how the people of the town saw the woman, and no matter how Simon the Pharisee saw the woman, and no matter how the woman even saw herself the great revelation of this story is how Jesus sees her. Jesus sees her not as a person of shame. Jesus sees her not as a person whose life has no value. Jesus sees her not as someone who is a ruined wreck. I guess you could say Jesus sees her as somebody's daughter. When I say Jesus sees her as somebody's daughter, I hope you hear that as it is intended. When Jesus sees a person as somebody's daughter, as somebody's son, that is a phrase loaded with theological significance.

In our epistle lesson this morning from II Corinthians chapter 5 the Apostle Paul wrote, "So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view...if anyone is in Christ, there is new creation. The old has gone and the new has come." When we sang the wonderful children's song today about butterflies, this spiritual reality was making my heart dance. Like the transformation from a caterpillar to a chrysalis to a brand new beautiful butterfly, in Christ Jesus the old passes away and the new comes. However, unlike the butterfly, the spiritual transformation human beings experience is not a natural transformation. The natural pattern for human life is to be born, to grow old, and to die. But God intervenes into this natural process that moves from life to death and God brings new creation. So, Paul writes that this new creation is from God, "Who reconciled us to himself through Christ.... God was not counting our sins against us." In terms of our spiritual lives, sin leads to death. And yet now God has intervened, through Jesus Christ, so that our sins are not counted against us. Indeed, the good news of the gospel is that our sins are forgiven.

In this powerful encounter that takes place right in the middle of a Pharisees dining room, we see both the gift of forgiveness being given freely and we see the passionate response of one who has experienced the deep healing and wholeness that comes from being forgiven. When Jesus perceives that Simon, the Pharisee is shaming and judging the woman, he tells a parable that gets to the heart of the matter.

"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, so he forgave the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?" Simon thinks it over and gives the obvious answer. "I suppose the one who had the bigger debt forgiven." And yes, Simon is right. Unfortunately for Simon, Simon is right. The one who had the bigger debt forgiven loves more.

Jesus turns to the woman and compares her outpouring of love to the almost complete lack of even basic hospitality that Simon displayed.

“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. You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet. Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—as her great love has shown. But whoever has been forgiven little loves little.”

Everything the woman does, the tears that wet his feet, wiping those tears with her hair, kissing his feet, bathing his feet in perfume, all her actions demonstrate that this woman has experienced a heaping helping of forgiveness. Her experience of forgiveness has touched her to her very soul. How do we know? We know because she loves much. She who has been forgiven much loves much.

As we savor this sweet moment of forgiveness and love, I do not want us to forget the theological statement I made that Jesus sees the woman as somebody’s daughter. I talked about Paul and the new creation, where the old is gone and the new has come, and the new creation comes because in Jesus Christ God is not counting our sins against us. It is because of this new creation that not only can Jesus see the woman as somebody’s daughter, but we can as well. And celebrating the sacrament of baptism today fits perfectly, serendipitously, even providentially with the new creation that is found in Jesus Christ.

The Apostle Paul, who wrote about new creation in II Corinthians talks about baptism in his letter to the Galatians. Paul tells us that in baptism we come to realize we are children of God. In baptism our old identities are washed away. In baptism he writes there is neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female...in other words, all the marks that identify us into particular groups and families and nationalities and races and classes and tribes disappear. Those things are our old identity. In Christ Jesus, when we are baptized, all those old things die away. And the new thing that comes is that we are simply children of God. In Romans 8 Paul talks about being adopted, adopted as a child of God, and so we cry out to God, to our Father in heaven, “*Abba*, Father.”

The people of the town, and Simon the Pharisee, and maybe even the woman saw herself as a failure, as an intruder, as an outsider, as an unwelcome guest, and as a person whose life was filled with shame. But Jesus saw her as somebody’s daughter. Jesus saw this woman as somebody’s daughter. In the same way Jesus sees you as somebody’s daughter, as somebody’s son. Just like Jesus sees me as somebody’s son. Just like Jesus is able to see all the people of this world as somebody’s son and somebody’s daughter. The “somebody” is God. Jesus sees us all as God’s sons and God’s daughters. Jesus sees us all as children of God. Because of Jesus we are all sons and daughters of God. Through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God has adopted us as his very own children.

Now I do not know how things came to be the way they came to be, but before Jesus gave his life on the cross, before Jesus removed the curse that separates us from God, before Jesus reconciled us to God through dying on the cross, before all these things that are the very essence of our salvation, this woman in Luke chapter seven experienced forgiveness, a forgiveness that was huge and massive and rich and warm and kind and caring. And before Jesus demonstrated the love of God so clearly by offering his life as an atoning sacrifice on the cross, before Jesus showed us the love that is the greatest love, somehow this woman got it. She loved Jesus with a love that was pure and tender and without pretense. This woman loved Jesus with no shame whatsoever. The woman loved Jesus because she experienced the transformation that comes from being forgiven.

I can't explain how she came to realize the new life in Christ before Jesus gave his life for her on the cross. But I really like the idea that this woman, instead of being a person of shame, is a role model for us. I guess you could say she is an early adopter. She understood, perhaps before anyone else, that she was somebody's daughter. She understood that she was adopted. The world and the town and Simon the Pharisee couldn't see it in her. But she did. She saw that through Jesus Christ she was a child of God. She was adopted. She had a new identity. She had a place. She had a family. She belonged. As she washed the feet of Jesus with her tears and wiped those feet with her hair and then covered them in perfume, she was demonstrating in an absolutely beautiful and absolutely perfect way how to respond when you hear the great and good news that you are somebody's daughter, and that somebody is God.

This woman was an early adopter. Even before the cross she found forgiveness and new creation and a new identity through Jesus Christ. In response, she loved much. If she loved much before the cross, how much will we love? How much will we love, as ones who now know the full story? How much will we love as ones who realize whatever shame, whatever brokenness, whatever failures, whatever sadness, whatever humiliation, whatever pain, whatever sorrow that marked our lives has been lifted up onto the shoulders of Jesus Christ, carried with him to the cross, and replaced with love and hope and a new beginning? If she loved much before the cross, how much will we love after the cross? And will we be able to see others as they truly are? Will we be able to see others not as strangers, not as aliens, not as foreigners, not as sinners, not as shameful, not as broken, not as rejected...will we be able to see others as they truly are? Will we be able to see others as God's beloved children? Will we be able to see others and say, "That's somebody's daughter. That's somebody's son." Truly we are all God's sons and God's daughters. We are all, each and every one of us, God's precious and beloved children. Knowing this incredible great news, may we be ones who are like this precious woman. May we be ones who love much.

So here on Mother's Day, I return to the picture my brother Barry sent me, the one where there is a piñata and my fancy boots any my Uncle Leona and Aunt Polly and that woman who means so much to me, my mother. My mom was an amazing woman. She was an amazing mother. But before she was somebody's mother, she was somebody's daughter. When she was very young her mother died. Not long after that her father had a debilitating stroke. He could not care for my mom and her siblings. They belonged to a small church. That church somehow came together and looked at my mom and her siblings. When they looked at them, they said, "That is somebody's daughter, that is somebody's son." That church stepped up and took in my mom and every one of her siblings, six in all. The Brechtbill's took my mom in. The Brechtbill's saw my mom, a little girl with no parent to care for her, and they said, "That is somebody's daughter." She became their daughter.

It was a sad time as my mother got older and went through the early stages of Alzheimer's. She forgot so much. But again, it was bittersweet, because one thing she never forgot, one thing she remembered right up to the end, is the name of the family that looked at her as a little girl and said, "That is somebody's daughter." My mom never forgot the name of the Brechtbill's. Love like that changes you. Love like that transforms you. I hope today you know when God sees you, God says, "That is somebody's daughter...that is somebody's son." And more than that God says, "That is my daughter...that is my son." I tell you, love like that transforms you. It makes you into a new person. It makes you into a new creation. And I not only hope, I believe, love like that helps us to look at others and say about them, "That...that...that is somebody's son, somebody's daughter...ah yes, that person is a son and a daughter of the living God." When we see people like that, we will be a people who love much.