

From Guilt to Freedom
Nashville UCC, March 10, 2019

This sermon, told in the first person, is based on the story of the unnamed woman anointing Jesus' feet while he is the dinner guest of a Pharisee. It is told in Luke 7:36-50.

Everybody knows me. When I go to the well in Jerusalem or visit the marketplace, everybody knows who I am. But no one calls me by my name. They just call me "that woman." When they acknowledge my presence at all, they stare at me and whisper to one another. Some of them look at me with faces twisted with pity. They know that my husband died suddenly two years ago, leaving me without father, son, or husband; and they feel sorry for me in my loneliness. But they never speak to me. Others look at me with disgust, noses wrinkled and lips curled in a sneer. They know that when I was left without a man to support me, I had to do whatever I could to survive. How could I get money except by selling myself? "How disgusting," they say to themselves, "we'd never do that!" But the worst are the ones who look at me with judgement. Their faces are cold and hard; and in their arrogance, they won't even come near me. "Her husband must have done something terrible for God to take him so young," they say, "and now she's sinning worse than he ever did."

What none of them know is that I judge myself even more harshly than they do. I know that I break God's law over and over again; but what am I to do? I, too, am disgusted by what I have to do to survive; and I yearn to have love in my life again. I hate my life; and sometimes, I have hated myself, too. That's what I have lived with for years: hate and guilt. No love; no understanding; no compassion. But then, I met Jesus. I will never forget that day, not if I live to be 100! I had heard that Jesus was a wise teacher; and that he healed people with all kinds of diseases. But more important than that: I had heard that he was gentle and kind to all those who came to him for help. And I had this wild idea that maybe he could help me, too! I don't know how I thought he could help me, but... something compelled me to seek him out. When I heard that he would be at the home of a Pharisee for dinner one evening, I decided to try to find him there. I couldn't go empty-handed, so I spent all the money that I had on a bottle of expensive perfume. Its fragrance reminded me of the little pink flowers that bloom in the spring here in Jerusalem. Those flowers are my favorites, because they remind me of the days when my husband and I would go walking in the fields together outside Jerusalem. I hoped that Jesus would like it.

Everybody in town seemed to know where Jesus was having dinner; so it was easy to get directions to the house. No one was at the front door – they were all in the room that was reserved for meals – so I just walked in. I had no idea what I was going to say to Jesus; I suppose I thought that words would magically appear in my head when I saw him. But when I entered the dining room and saw who was at the table, no words came, only tears – tears of embarrassment, shame, and anger. I didn't know the house, but I certainly knew the man who owned it. Jesus' host at dinner was none other than Simon, one of the men who visited me regularly, week in and week out. Simon, who always looked at me in disgust after he had used my services. Simon, who would not even hand me my fee before he left. Simon, who would throw my fee on the floor for me to pick up after he had left. As I stood there, frozen in shame, Simon turned and recognized me. I almost ran away; but I couldn't do that, not when I was

finally so close to Jesus! So I knelt at his feet, weeping – crying with big sobs that shook my whole body – weeping for what had become of me, for what I was forced to do to survive, and for a life that had no love or compassion in it. I had intended to give Jesus the perfume bottle; but instead, I broke it open and I poured the perfume on his feet. Its fragrance and the memory of those beautiful flowers made me cry even harder. Oh, it was quite a scene: I was weeping and pouring perfume on Jesus' feet, while Simon scowled at me from the head of the table.

And then Jesus spoke: not to me, but to Simon. "I have come to Jesus for nothing," I thought. "He is going to ignore me." But that's not what happened at all! Jesus criticized Simon! "This woman," Jesus said, "has done more for me than you have. You haven't showed me any respect at all; and she has showed me love!" And then he turned to me – and I'll never, ever forget what he said – he said, "Your sins are forgiven. Your faith has saved you. Go in peace." I couldn't believe what I was hearing! Jesus forgave me! Jesus didn't look at me as a disgusting piece of trash; he treated me as a human being worthy of love! I wept even harder then, because it had been so long since I had heard kind words. And I will never forget Jesus' eyes when he looked at me. They were loving and compassionate – like the eyes of my husband had once been. I thought I'd never see eyes like that again! It took a little while for me to collect myself so that I could thank Jesus and leave Simon's house; but no one dared to sneer at me – at least, not while Jesus was there.

I'm still "that woman" in Jerusalem. People still look at me with pity, or disgust, or judgement. That hasn't changed. But since I met Jesus, I have changed. I don't hate myself any more. Since Jesus loves me, I know that I am worthy of love. And because Jesus loves me, I can love others again. But the most marvelous change in me is that I'm free! When Jesus told me that my sins were forgiven, all the guilt that I felt melted away like olive oil flowing out of the press. I was free from the chains of guilt that had kept me a prisoner for so long! You might not think that I deserved forgiveness; but Jesus thought that I did; and that's all that matters. He set me free from the guilt of my past, and because he did, he gave me new life

Do you feel guilty? Do you hate yourself because of some of things that you've done? Come to Jesus; he won't turn you away. He can set you free, just like he set me free. Just ask him! Let him throw off the chains of guilt that are holding you; and then, my friends, you will *truly* be free.