



ST. MICHAEL'S SERMONS

Greenville, SC

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Luke 7:36—8:3

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"For Love"

The things we do for love...when you hear that phrase many of you may remember these lyrics from a popular seventies song... "Like walkin' in the rain and the snow, when there's no where to go and you're feeling like a part of you is dying, and you're looking for the answer in her eyes, you think you wanna break up, she says she wants to make up...the things we do for love."

Or maybe when you hear that phrase you think of going out at midnight to get chocolate milk for your wife because it's what she's craving, or maybe what comes to mind is staying up late with your child to finish a project that's due the next day and they've just mentioned it to you, or maybe you remember the many days and nights you sat up, without sleep, to be with someone who was sick and needed you. When I hear that phrase I think of all those times I watched yet another baseball game because I knew it would make him happy. Your story may be different but I'm sure all of us can think of something we have done or would do for love.

The things we do for love...we search and we sacrifice, we laugh and we cry, we stay and we go, we plead and we pray, we accept and we agree, we forgive and we forget...*it's amazing the things we do for love*. In today's Gospel lesson from Luke we hear a story of great love, a story of grace and forgiveness; a story about an unusual dinner party.

And so it begins...Jesus has been invited to dinner at the home of a Pharisee named Simon. It's not that surprising that Jesus accepted the invitation, considering Jesus didn't usually turn down invitations to dinner, but it is a bit more surprising that the Pharisee extended the invitation to begin with.

Most likely, Simon the Pharisee did not invite Jesus to dinner out of love or respect for Him, but rather in His inviting, the Pharisee may have been looking for an opportunity to observe Jesus more closely, possibly adding something else to the list of items for which Jesus might be criticized; an invitation for a roasting, rather than a toasting.

We know from earlier accounts in Luke's Gospel that Jesus was often criticized by many for eating with sinners and tax collectors, and this dinner party might have been a chance to stir up more gossip about Jesus and His dining habits. But there was something else peculiar about this dinner party. In Jesus' day, a dinner guest would have been greeted with a warm welcome such as a foot washing, a kiss and an anointing. But Simon the Pharisee did none of these things for Jesus. But we hear that an unlikely guest entered Simon's home and welcomed Jesus herself.

"And a woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that Jesus was eating in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. 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 ointment."

The things we do for love... Here was a woman most people wouldn't speak to, much less touch. And yet she is wiping the feet of Jesus the Christ, with her hair and her tears, an obvious act of adoration. Now Simon the Pharisee was watching this happen and murmuring, "if Jesus really is who He says He is, why would he let a sinner like this woman kiss his feet and anoint Him, doesn't He realize how vile she is?" Thinking to himself how his sin pales in comparison to hers.

But Jesus does not make her stop, make her feel silly or embarrassed, nor does he turn her away, instead he shows her grace and mercy and says to her, ***"Your sins are forgiven."***

This was a woman on the edge, an outcast, a sinner, and so to us it should be no surprise that Jesus treated her well. We know Jesus spent most of his time hanging out with people on the edge. Those people you or I would not normally invite into our home for dinner. Those people that we might quickly walk past or turn away from on the street corner of Augusta Road, those people we think don't look or act like us. Those are the people Jesus kept company with. He understood that there was new life waiting on the edges and love and forgiveness knows no social border.

The things we do for love...

As I read this text over and over I began to ask myself... ***What is love truly? Is it simply a word we use to describe the way we feel? A romantic emotion? A description of strong affection? Is love really limited in that way?***

Love...How would you define or describe it? Is it that fluttering in your stomach when you look over at the person next to you and realize what a gift and blessing they are in your life? Is it that involuntary smile that breaks out on your face when you think of your sister and how much she makes you laugh? Is it that primal urge to protect your children and take away their pain, no matter how old they are and what the cost is to you? Is it that indescribable bond between you and your parents?

It is, of course, all of those wonderful things and so much more. Love, as the cliché says, makes the world go round. It makes life worth living. It conquers all. It is, simply, the most powerful emotion there is. Love gives us strength, offers protection, nurtures, bonds, and brings indescribable joy. Love changes our lives. Whether it is love for our parents, for our children, for our spouse, for our siblings, for our friends, for ourselves, or love for the God of all that is living, love can truly empower our lives.

I'm sure over the last few days many of you have watched the news coverage of Ruth Bell Graham's death. You have probably heard the words spoken about her by her loving husband and family, but I want to share with you what Billy Graham said in a statement just hours after her death. He spoke of his love for Ruth.

"Ruth was my life partner and we were called by God as a team. No one else could have borne the load she carried. She was a vital and integral part of our ministry, and my work through the years would have been impossible without her encouragement and support. I am so grateful to the Lord that he gave me Ruth, and especially for these last few years we've had in the mountains together. We've rekindled the romance of our youth, and my love for her continued to grow deeper every day."

The things we do for love...we bear loads we never thought we could, we support and encourage even when we feel we have nothing left to give, we love those we thought we never could, we forgive those we thought we could not forgive. We do it for love.

As the Gospel story continues, Jesus spoke up and said to Simon the Pharisee, "I have something to say to you..." Then Jesus goes on to tell Simon a parable of a creditor who has forgiven the debt of two debtors, one with a great debt and the other with little. Then he asks Simon, "Now which of them will love the creditor more?" And Simon answers, "I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt," and Jesus replies, "You have judged rightly."

Then as Jesus turned toward the woman at his feet, he asked, ***"Simon, Do you see this woman? I entered your house and you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment...therefore her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little."***

***I hear that same question echoed in this place today...
Do we see this woman?***

Can we relate to the pain and guilt she must have felt as she knelt down at the feet of Jesus, weeping, overcome by Jesus' radical acceptance of her and her extravagant love. Or maybe we relate to Simon the Pharisee, the one who stands at a distance judging the sins of another because he is too afraid to examine himself. Blinded by pride and power, unable to see the woman before him as more than a class of person, unable to see her for the unique individual God crafted her to be, a person with her own story, her own life and dignity, a person in need of love and forgiveness.

She has been forgiven and hence she has shown great love...

True love comes about because we have been forgiven, because our greatest debts have been washed away. True love is the love that is offered to us by the one who loved us enough to die for us, Jesus Christ our Savior. True love opens our eyes and our hearts. It helps us to see things differently, helps us to do things differently.

True love, Christ's love, helps us to do the unimaginable, to forgive the unforgivable, to be the person we want to be, to be the person God has created us to be—a forgiven and forgiving sinner, a lover and one who is loved beyond imagination.

In this Gospel lesson we do not hear Jesus criticize Simon for sinning too much; but in the telling of the parable Jesus clearly accuses Simon of loving too little. It is Simon's miserly love and his small heart that has blinded him from the extravagant love the woman has offered Jesus and separated him from the radical acceptance Jesus offers in return.

One of the best memories I have of my sister from when I was a little girl, was a trip we took to the fair. She and I piled into the ambulance she drove as an EMT and off we went. I'm not sure that was totally legal but it was definitely part of the adventure. After riding all the rides and eating way too much, my sister suggested we have one of those caricatures done of the two of us to give our parents as a gift. At least 15 years later my mom and dad still have that silly thing. And a few weeks ago when I was cleaning out my closet at their house I ran across it. I laughed and laughed as I looked at that distorted picture of the two of us. Ears and nose all misshapen, oversized heads and crooked eyes.

Only a mother or a father could love that picture, really. I share that memory with you today because it was that silly image of my sister and me that helped me to understand that without love we are all reduced to caricatures. Distorted and misshapen, weird and misunderstood. Without love we are merely caricatures of people who feel unlovable, or unable to love, who feel unforgivable, or unable to forgive.

But the Good News of the Gospel message is that we are loved, and the true love Christ offers us straightens out that distortion and holds up for us a mirror of love and forgiveness, a mirror that reminds us that Christ loves us just the way we are; whether we are the one with the greater debt or the smaller; whether we are the woman weeping at his feet or the Pharisee murmuring in judgment.

Christ's word to us today is a word of hope, "Your sins are forgiven, Your faith has saved you, go in peace."

His word challenges us to remember that justice, forgiveness and love are not rooted in our human claims on life and one another, but in God's claim on us.

We are not our own. We are God's. His beloved creatures. In our Baptism into Christ's death and resurrection we are marked with the cross of Christ forever and sealed with the promised Holy Spirit. And told by Christ to go in peace.

So then where does one go when told by Christ to go in peace?

As Christians, we go together into the world, in peace, to be Christ's hands and feet, to share His message of love and forgiveness, to be the Church in this place.

And it is because He first loved us and first forgave us that we are able to love and to forgive, to go forth into the world. It is because of this reality that we are able to reach out to those in need, to offer a place of belonging, a place where all people are welcomed and accepted for who they are.

Jesus' radical and liberating love calls us to love and to forgive ourselves and one another...but not only those who are close to us, those who are like us or those we like, but called and equipped by Christ to love and to forgive the person we're angry with, the person who hurt us, the person we don't know or like, the widows, orphans, outcasts and sinners.

Isn't it amazing the things we can do because we're loved?

Forgiveness is a process, not just one act... and true love is a state of being, not just an emotion.

The things we do for Love... Jesus was born for it, lived for it, died for it and rose again so that we too may know it, have it, live it and share it.

I ask you, what will we do with this love?

Thanks be to God. Amen.