



“Living Forgiven”

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Hayward, California***

***Third Sunday after Pentecost
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Luke 7:36–8:3 (NRSV)***

Today’s gospel account about the woman with the alabaster jar is a portrait in contrasts. The contrasts are so distinct that you can smell them within the first sentences of the story—sort of like how you can’t miss that you’re in the perfume section of a major department store, or that you’ve arrived on barn cleaning day at my cousin’s dairy farm.

Beginning with verse 36 in chapter 7 of Luke’s gospel, we note the sharp contrast between the generosity of an unnamed woman and the stinginess of the Pharisees.

As the story unfolds, we observe the open-heartedness of Jesus compared with the close-mindedness of the Pharisees. And we sense the sweet smell of God’s grace comingling with the rancor of human judgment. You can’t miss it. You just can’t miss it.

In the end, self-reflective people discover our own stories mirrored in the gospel account, and we are enticed to allow the fragrant love of God to transform the odiferous smell of our shame, so that we might follow the example of that unnamed woman and become bearers of God’s extravagant grace to others.

Whether our vessels are made of alabaster, or the contents are of pure nard are less important than the spiritual disposition that we embody. Because those whom we encounter will be able to sense—even at a distance—that our lives have been transformed, and that theirs may be too.

II

Luke’s account of the woman with the alabaster jar reminds us that the gospel is a scandal, except to those who receive and embrace it. The gospel was especially scandalous to the Pharisees, those first-century harbingers of judgment. The Pharisees were scholars of religious law, and thought (like many then and now) that judgment was all there was, that grace did not exist, and that the only hope for a better life was by perfectly following all the rules and always coloring inside the lines.

It doesn't take a lot of imagination to understand how some folks arrive at pharisaic spiritual dispositions, then or now. Some were raised in households that embodied and taught that God's economy was closed, that there wasn't enough grace (or anything else) to go around, so you better be sure and get yours now and make sure that no one else gets any.

Others developed a sense of a closed spiritual economy from living through hard economic times. We think that times are tough now. But they are nothing compared to the struggles faced by Jesus' contemporaries. Still, then and now, many people believe that one's socio-economic class is established at birth, and that the only possible direction for mobility is down. If someone in an upper class gave someone from a lower class a hand up, there would be less for them, and in the end, less for all to go around. It was a zero-sum game, then and now, for those who lived and still live in a closed spiritual economy.

Into this closed spiritual economy of the Pharisees came a man named Jesus and a woman whose name we never learn. Jesus had garnered a reputation for following the prophets' teachings, while the Pharisees preached zealous adherence to the Law, which even exceeded the instructions of the Levitical priests in ancient times.

This unnamed woman in Luke's gospel had heard of Jesus, and she exhibited the audacity to believe that God's forgiveness and grace were meant for her. She not only received and believed this news, she became a new person altogether. The abundant, fragrant perfume that she poured over Jesus' feet in thanksgiving for her transformation was a symbol of the extravagant love and grace that she had already received from God.

The Pharisees claimed that Jesus was a fraud and that the woman was a sinner. Jesus, by comparison, allowed the people around him to judge for themselves whether he was a faux prophet or the real deal, and he gave God the glory for the woman's transformation and explained that she had been saved from her sins.

The Pharisees saw waste. Jesus proclaimed grace. The gospel was a scandal, then—as it is now—except to those who receive and believe it.

III

I wonder, "Where do we see ourselves situated in this story about the woman with the alabaster jar?" Do we recognize ourselves in the stinginess of the Pharisees, or the generosity of the unnamed woman?

When others start preaching a zero-sum game, do we crack open the gospel, like Jesus did, and start preaching a theology of abundance? Or do we advance the Pharisee's theology of scarcity?

When the invitations to the party go out, do we show up and celebrate another's change, or do we slink into the shadows questioning the worth of the honoree or the likelihood that he or she is really changed?

Pharisees or anonymous woman? What's it going to be today? How might we have answered in the past? How would we answer today, or in the future?

Last night Stephanie and I bumped into a few Pharisees. We were on our way to the red carpet runway at the East Bay Gay Prom, where we joined about 40 other area volunteers in serving as prom greeters. (Prom greeters are people who cheer as the students—sometimes alone, sometimes in couples, and sometimes in groups—head into the prom entrance).

The East Bay Gay Prom was founded by Horizons, Inc. of Hayward, the largest drug and alcohol treatment program in the East Bay. Several years ago, I asked the executive director of Horizons what inspired his organization to sponsor Gay Prom. (He, after all is a heterosexual, and so are most of the people on his staff and in their treatment programs.)

The executive director explained to me that Horizons founded Gay Prom, as a response to research results that came from a study of their clients. One of the findings in Horizon's research revealed that relative to the total population of the Bay Area, a disproportionate number of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender persons were LGBT were showing up as addicts in their treatment programs. Horizons wanted to know why that was, and what they could do on the prevention side of addiction to minimize the likelihood that LGBT youth would become addicts.

To answer this question, researchers went to the experts. They asked LGBT clients for their thoughts about what could have been different in their youth that might have prevented them from becoming addicts. The overwhelming majority who responded explained that they would have benefited from more social support for dating and from healthier contexts for socializing when they were teens.

Clients and researchers together realized that prom was the quintessential expression of the teen dating experience. So as a symbol of Horizon's commitment to addiction prevention and sobriety among young LGBT people, they founded Gay Prom more than 10 years ago.

Over the years, Stephanie and I and others from Eden Church have joined a host of religious and community leaders, school teachers and administrators, and helping professionals and social club representatives in serving as greeters at Gay Prom. Every year, we've been entertained by members of the San Francisco Freedom Band who set up next to the red carpet each year.

Together we have striven to create a celebrative, supportive environment for the nearly 300 students who have participated in Gay Prom each year, and we have endeavored

to drown out the noise of the 30 or so protestors—all of whom seem to have been from fundamentalist Christian churches in the area—and whom hoisted hateful posters and shouted hateful slogans at us on prom night.

Each year, we greeters marvel at the thought that there is a Gay Prom in our area. Each year, people my age and older make comments about how we could never have imagined a Gay Prom when we were teens. So to see this progress offers some healing for us, too. Each year, we delight in the creativity we see in the kids' prom outfits, and we revel in the courage they exhibit as they show up, pass courageously by the protestors, buy their tickets at the counter, and make their way down the red carpet.

You don't have to be a licensed clinical psychologist to interpret the looks on these kids' faces, and to sense the courage that they have had to muster just to show up at prom. And yet, there they were. There they were, like that unnamed woman in Luke's gospel, sensing that there was a grace meant for them, that there was a party going on, and that they were invited—and they showed up!

As the students start down the red carpet, most of them looked shy and a bit bewildered about the greeter line up, but as the greeters start cheering and clapping, the prom-goers start to smile, lift up their heads, and walk taller. Some even started waving their arms like athletes do when running through a human tunnel on the way out of the locker room. These kids' acceptance of this welcome at the door bathes them in what may seem like an extravagance—and with some encouragement—they were and are able to share this grace with others.

IV

Regardless of whether we have ever been to Gay Prom or not, regardless of our sexual orientation or preference, regardless of who we are, we have all received invitations of one sort or another to receive the gift of God's extravagant grace.

Like the unnamed woman in Luke 7, we have all received the invitation. How, I wonder, have we responded in the past? How do we respond now and in the future? Do we recognize ourselves in the stinginess of the Pharisees, or the generosity of the unnamed woman? Stingy Pharisees, or generous woman?

The truth be told, I suspect that our answer to these questions depends on the day and the circumstances that we find ourselves in, and how we're feeling about ourselves at a particular point in time.

On our bad days, when we are feeling poorly about ourselves and our own circumstances, I suspect that we can easily slip into the role of the Pharisees. We may not be particularly proud of this revelation, but the good news is that our circumstances need not be fixed.

On our good days—and let's tell it like it is—God wants all our days to be good days, we imagine ourselves as the unnamed woman with the alabaster jar. We imagine that God's good news is meant for us. We know that there is enough grace to go around, and that if we share it with others that grace will seem to expand, rather than contract as our capacity to feel it and share it grows.

I don't know each person's exact circumstances in this room. I don't know the fine points of each of our upbringings, or the particular struggles that we have endured that makes it easier for us to listen to the bad-news "Pharisee voices" in our heads, rather than the good news "Jesus voices;" but I know that we all have days when we hear these voices, and that the days when the Pharisee voices prevail can sometimes seem more frequent and more negative.

That's why we need to return to these ancient stories like the woman with the alabaster jar. That's why we need to read and reflect on them. That way we can remind ourselves that God's grace is extravagant, and that it was meant for us and for all.

V

As you got out of your car today, I hope that you could smell that truth—even before you came into the church. I hope that you could smell the fragrant scent of God's grace wafting around our church. I hope that you could smell a perfume that was as strong as the pure nard that the unnamed woman poured over Jesus' feet.

But if you didn't—if you didn't get a whiff of that grace as you approached the Sanctuary today, I hope that you can smell it now, and that you will bathe in it now and wear it out into the world so that others whom you encounter today will be able to sense—even at a distance—that your life has been transformed, and that maybe—just maybe—theirs could be too.

That is what the gospel is all about. That was what all the fuss was about at the dinner party in Luke 7. That is what the invitation Jesus offered to us and to all—to smell the fragrant gift of God's grace, to let it seep into the depths of our souls, so that we might believe its truth for ourselves, and be freed up to go and give it away to others with great extravagance and for the glory of God. Amen.