



January 15, 2012
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*the One with all the questions:
Who Cares?
Luke 7:36-50*

Over Christmas break I took my kids duck hunting in Snohomish. There is a cool breakfast place there called Jake's Diner. The food is good, the décor is quirky and the waitresses are... grouchy. While mine was pouring my coffee, the cook rang the bell for her several times...and she screamed, "Shut up"...and never spilled a drop. It was quite...exciting. Near the end of the meal she asked me how I was doing. I told her, "It was great. And the magic of this place is only enhanced by your charming personality." She looked at me and said, "The minute you walked in, I knew I didn't like you."

In our story this morning, a woman appeared at a dinner party. And the minute she walked in....the host didn't like her, either.

This morning we begin the first sermon series of the New Year: "the One with all the questions." Remember, we are calling this the Year of Good News. Our prayer is that the members of our church will become more confident sharing with others what Jesus means to them. Jesus is "good news" and we want to be better "good news sharers."

But one thing that holds people back from sharing the good news is this: we think we need to have all the answers. How many of you remember the Shell Answer Man ads from the seventies? He had all kinds of helpful tips about how to drive, how to take care of your car, how to save money on your home energy bill. He had all the answers. That's why he was the... "Answer Man." If we think that we have to be the Christian version of the Shell Answer Man, not many of us will want to share our faith.

There is only one person who had all the answers...and the amazing thing about Jesus is how often he didn't give answers. Instead, he asked questions. Lots of probing questions. And then, he listened. Jesus, the one with all the answers, was also the One with all the questions. By the end of this series, you may not have all the answers, but you will have lots of useful questions that will help you share your faith. Sound good?

Our text this morning has to be one of the most awkward stories in the gospels. A Pharisee named Simon invited Jesus to his house for dinner. Pharisees were the hyper-religious Jews. They were sticklers for keeping all the rules. We don't

Simon's motives for asking Jesus to dinner. Maybe he wanted to trap him. (Lots of Pharisees tried.) Or maybe he was seriously curious about this rabbi from Nazareth. Whatever the case, Jesus is the guest of honor at his table.

Everyone is enjoying themselves. Eating, talking, laughing. But suddenly, the place goes dead quiet. A woman....a prostitute, probably...appears beside the table. Imagine! A hooker walking into a Pharisee's home... uninvited! If you were entertaining guests at your home and an unsavory person opened your front door and just walked right into your dining room and stood beside your table! How would you feel?

It was shocking to Simon and his guests. And even more shocking was what happened next. We read that "she brought an alabaster jar of perfume, and as she stood behind Jesus at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears." Wait a second. That doesn't make sense, does it? It does if you remember how people ate back then. There were no chairs. People reclined on pillows around the table with their stinky feet sticking out away from the food. This woman walked over behind Jesus and stood there, and she was crying so hard that her tears poured out on his feet.

That would be awkward enough, right? But things were only warming up. The woman had long hair and suddenly, still crying, she knelt down, and began to dry her tears from Jesus' feet with her hair. Okay, it's getting weirder. Then she kneels even closer and kisses his feet. OK...now this is getting creepy. And Then she pulls out an alabaster jar that she had brought, takes off the lid...and begins to pour this expensive anointing oil on Jesus's feet.

How many here uncomfortable with their own feet. How many of you would love for a stranger to come up while you were lying on the beach and begin fiddling with your bare feet? And in those days...of open sandals and dusty, manure-covered roads... feet were even more disgusting. The slave who was assigned foot-washing duties in a house was on the bottom rung of the servant pecking order.

Like I said, Awkward! This distraught woman—invading a party uninvited—and carrying out these very intimate acts on the guest of honor in plain sight of everyone. If Simon invited Jesus to test him, he just failed the test. If he were a prophet, he would certainly know the reputation of this woman and would never tolerate this over-the-top display of emotionalism and physical touch. Of course, Simon was only thinking these things. He was too proper to say them out loud. But Jesus knew what he was thinking. And he tells a parable about a money lender who forgave two debts. One huge debt; the other smaller. Then he asks, "Simon... which debtor will love the man more?" "I suppose the one who was forgiven more," the Pharisee responded. (And then Jesus lowers the boom!) "You are disgusted by this woman's treatment of me. But I am your guest and yet you did not offer the most basic of hospitality. No servant washed my feet.

You did not greet me with a kiss. You did not anoint my head with oil. Our culture built upon hospitality but you have been rude to me. And yet, this woman...whom you despise... she has treated me with love and honor." Then he turns to her and says, "Your sins are forgiven. Your faith has saved you; go in peace." It's a wonderful story of deep repentance and gracious forgiveness. Remember...this sermon series is about Jesus' questions. Did you find it? Verse 44: "Do you see this woman?" Now was that really the question Jesus was asking Simon? "Hey... I wondered...did you happen to notice that there is a prostitute standing here above me...dripping tears on me, wiping her hair on me, kissing my feet, pouring oil on them...I just wondered...did you notice that?" Of course he noticed. Jesus' question wasn't really "Do you see this woman?", was it? It was what? "How do you see this woman?"

So, answer Jesus' question. How did Simon see this woman? With disgust? With humiliation? With contempt? She was an uninvited embarrassment. She had no business even being inside the home of this respected religious leader, much less hovering over his honored guest. She was exactly the kind of person that a reputable religious man wanted nothing to do with. "Simon...when you look at this woman, what do you see?" Answer? A sinner! A lowlife! An example of what is wrong with our society.

That's how Simon the Pharisee saw her. How did Jesus see her? A beloved child of God. Precious to the Father. Sinful? Yes. Broken? Yes. Desperate? Yes. But When Jesus looked at her he didn't focus on her shameful past. He saw someone who was repentant...and grateful...and longed to be forgiven and made new. Jesus had come to earth on a search and save mission. This was one he had come to save. And he cared for her.

Shortly another article will appear in the Tacoma paper about the four churches in our presbytery that are seeking dismissal from the PC USA. When we pastors agreed to meet with the reporter, we thought we were being interviewed about theological shifts taking place in our denomination and about the gracious and Christ-honoring way that our presbytery is dealing with this issue. Only after we were together did we discover that the subject of the article had already been decided; already written, in a sense. So...we got ambushed. And I'm certain that Chapel Hill will be portrayed, once again, as hateful and judgmental. We will see more letters to the editor describing us a Pharisees.

So...is it true? Are we just a bunch of holier-than-thou Pharisees who think we have it all together and are disgusted when anyone who doesn't walk through our doors? God help us, I hope not. I hope never. And I don't believe it. Chapel Hill has never been a place where we say, "Look at us; look how holy we are; isn't God lucky to have us." We are a church with Celebrate Recovery and Life Hurts/God Heals and Lay Counseling. We've staffed and programmed for the whole of people who need Jesus. Our congregation has lots of people whose lives are messy; more than most! Starting with pastors who regularly illustrate their

sermons with confession of their own sin...and we think this is just what Jesus intends.

That woman came to that party in tears; broken, despairing, repentant, longing to be forgiven. Simon saw her as a sinner to be despised and judged. Jesus saw her as a beloved child of God whom he had come to save. So...how do we see her...and folks like her? How do we respond when someone shows up who doesn't...belong. Who doesn't look...right? Who is suspicious? Who is embarrassing? I heard a story once about a Sunday worship service in a southern church. It was very traditional and elegant. Everyone in suit and tie. But into that service walked a long-haired, bare-footed guy. Covered with tattoos, he hadn't showered in a week. He took a bulletin from the usher, walked to the front of the sanctuary... and sat down on the floor right below the pulpit. Everyone was aghast! Finally, the head usher...an elderly, dignified, well-dressed man...walked slowly down the aisle toward the young man.

Everybody watched; they knew the usher was going to deal with this "problem." He leaned down, touched the boy's shoulder and whispered something in his ear. People were elbowing each other waiting for the fireworks. Then slowly, the old man lowered himself to the ground next to the boy...and sat there for the rest of the service. When the pastor got up to preach he said, "You will not remember the words I am about to say, but you will never forget the sermon you have just seen."

By contrast, I heard this story about our own church. Last August one of our families had visiting relatives who are not church folks but who agreed to come to Chapel Hill with them. One of them was a teenage girl who didn't really want to come and who wore clothes that were kind of...out there. A woman in our church saw this girl, walked up to her after the service and said, "You are dressed inappropriately." As you can imagine, that teenager doesn't ever want to come back to our church again.

Do you see that woman? If we were to sum up Jesus' question to us in two words, it might be this: Who cares? We are surrounded with people who are struggling in life; who have blown it; who have thrown away their opportunities and made a mess of things... and Jesus' question is, who cares! We drive by Purdy Prison and see women gathered in the courtyard. Who cares? We know kids who are completely screwing up their lives. Who cares? We know couples who are struggling to stay together. Who cares?

And even if we do care about those whose sins are more "out there" for everyone to see...what about the rest of us who just do a better job of hiding shameful behavior? When we look at the couple that seems to have it together: nice house, great kids, good job, new car...but who don't know Jesus...and are, in fact, just as lost as the folks who are less clever at camouflaging their sin...who cares for them

Here's the deal: if we don't care for broken and lost people---which, by the way, everyone of us was or is--we will never share the good news with them. If we don't care, we won't share. If we look at the lost with the eyes of Simon, we won't care. We will be disgusted. Disturbed. Inconvenienced. We won't want them to mess up our party. If we look at the lost with the eyes of Jesus, however, we will care. Because we see a beloved child of God whom Jesus came to save. And IF we see them with the eyes of Jesus...if we care for them with the heart of Jesus...then we will want to share with them the good news of Jesus. If we don't, we won't. If you aren't sharing Jesus with anyone...it is probably because you don't really care.

Who will speak words of salvation and hope into the lives of your lost friends? Who will speak the words, "Your sins are forgiven; your faith has saved you; go in peace?" Who will it be? Anyone? Who really cares? Anyone? You are the Body of Christ. You are the only Jesus this lost world will ever know. If the love and salvation and forgiveness and peace of Jesus are going to be shared with your lost friends... it's going to be you who does the sharing. Or no one. So...who... cares? Last Sunday nearly 1700 of us renewed our baptismal vows. Water was placed on you by spiritual leaders to remind you of your salvation. This morning...I want us to anoint each other. As this song is sung, we are going to pass bowls of oil up and down the aisles. I want you to place a drop of oil on the back of your neighbor's hand and ask, "Who cares?" You may receive it silently and just think about it...or if you wish, you might reply, "I care."

Sermon Questions

- **REFLECT & APPLY TOGETHER:** Share your thoughts. Don't teach! Listen and reflect on God's word together; grapple with what God is calling us to do and be through this passage.

- **PRAY TOGETHER:** Tell the Lord one thing you are thankful for, and lay one concern before the Lord.

- **DIG DEEPER**

1. What was the question Jesus asked in this text? To whom was it directed? What was He getting at?
2. When Pastor Mark says that "caring precedes sharing," what does he mean? How does that speak to your own life and witness?
3. Whom do you need to see in a different way before you will care enough to share Jesus with them?