

Blessed Assurance
Luke 7:36-50
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Today, as you know, is Father's Day. I feel like there is a connection between today's mainly secular celebration and the relationship that some of us might have had with our fathers. Not that I'm trying to compare my dad to Jesus, but rather that I have put him in the position of needing to forgive me more times than I can count. I don't know about you, but I grew up hearing the commandment about honoring your parents more than any of the other nine. Mainly from my parents claiming their due during what they called my "snitty phase." For a country girl, I did have quite the attitude there for a while. My siblings and parents would refer to me as "Mary Lenox" when I was in a snit. That would be the main character from the *Secret Garden*. Their reference would be from the beginning of the book when she was unbearably spoiled. I used to squint up my eyes and glare at him when he made me angry. He termed this the "hate stare" and tended to laugh whenever I used it, which of course made me all the more angry. Every time I stared him down or was snitty toward him or broke curfew, there was forgiveness there for me. Perhaps this is part of why I love him so much – like Jesus said: "one to whom little is forgiven, loves little." There are many people who I've asked forgiveness from. Probably ten times as many people I should have asked forgiveness from and didn't even realize it (or was too embarrassed to ask for it.).

The woman who approaches Jesus in the Pharisee's house is sinful. We don't know what her offenses are, only that she was sinful enough that the Pharisee thought because Jesus was allowing her to perform this devotion of washing and kissing his feet

he must not be a real prophet. Otherwise he would have known who she was, what kind of person she was, and would have turned her out. Jesus, always the teacher, let the Pharisee know that because of her act of devotion and deep repentance behind this act her sins are forgiven. Moreover, he says, “one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.” She loves so much because so much has been forgiven.

I love the reckless abandon with which this sinful woman approaches Jesus. I, for one, would be severely taken aback if I sat down to eat and someone came in from nowhere crying over my feet and using her hair as a rag. Jesus, our ever graceful Messiah takes it all in stride. Because he knows what’s behind it. And from it we can learn two important lessons. The first is that no matter how much wrong we do, forgiveness and love are always available. The second is that there is love and grace in accepting that forgiveness. Jesus receives this woman’s devotion and repentance. She, in turn, receives his forgiveness. I believe that she does, in fact, go in peace.

There are possibly only few blanket statements I feel comfortable making about this congregation. This one I’m sure of – we’re not perfect. None of us. We all make mistakes, say things we don’t mean, forget God, treat others as less than our beloved neighbors, forget to pray, wish something bad would happen to that annoying person on the subway who is looking for a new ring tone – at the loudest volume possible – ruining what might otherwise be a nice, quiet-ish train ride. The list goes on. This sinful woman, who doesn’t even get a name in Luke’s Gospel account of this beautiful moment, teaches us that no matter how many sins accumulate during our lives, Jesus will receive us. We think of Jesus as a giver, often. He gives us lessons, stories, glimpses of God, miracles, in the end we know he gives all of himself. In this story, he receives. It is the sinful woman

who has something to give. She gives her love, her pain, her devotion, her faith. Jesus receives. It makes no sense to the Pharisee, a character in the story who might seem a lot like someone in your own life. Someone who thinks they've got it all together and doesn't need forgiveness – especially when it looks as messy and weird as this exchange does. We see Jesus accept the anointing of a sinful woman. This is a powerful and poetic moment. Just like us, she has made mistakes and has been separated from God. She comes to Jesus and begs him to accept her, which he does. Instantly. And the woman accepts the forgiveness offered to her by Jesus. This is what fills her so completely with emotion that she uses her tears to anoint the feet of the one who receives her and forgives her. The dance of seeking and offering forgiveness happens perfectly in this Gospel.

Just as sure as I am that we all have made (and will make) mistakes in our life, I am equally sure that someone we care about in some capacity has caused us pain. Just as we all need to seek forgiveness, we also need to offer forgiveness. We can all see ourselves in both positions of this story, the woman and Jesus. Seeking and offering forgiveness is an uncomfortable exchange. To seek forgiveness means we admit we have done something wrong, something hurtful. To offer forgiveness can be embarrassing, it requires revisiting the wrongdoing, being vulnerable by admitting we were hurt to the very person who caused the pain. The end of the exchange is taking on the role of the “patient and forgiving one” (Brendan Walsh, “Forgiveness and Transformation”), which might makes us feel weak or like we've just given permission for someone to hurt us. There is so much fear involved with offering forgiveness – does this mean that the hurt wasn't real? or that we'll allow it to happen again? or that we'll just forget about it and learn or teach nothing? I don't think this is what was happening with the woman and

Jesus. Brendan Walsh, who works for the Catholic Church's aid and development agency in the UK writes, "Forgiveness allows us to remember our betrayals without being destroyed by them." It is risky to seek and to offer forgiveness. We admit our mistakes or we open ourselves up to someone who has made a mistake with us. The risk is worth it. That's what this story teaches us. The sinful woman, approaching the table of a Pharisee, someone well acquainted with all the purity laws there are, is taboo. She believes Jesus can forgive her and takes the risk to ask for it with her beautiful actions. She is not rejected or tossed aside or ignored. She is received. And she receives the forgiveness Jesus offers her, allowing her to go in peace. Jesus' forgiveness does not make her forget her sins, but it does prevent her from being destroyed by those sins. She leaves in peace, a state she certainly has not achieved since she committed her first sin. Doesn't this sound great? But there's one more challenge in this for us.

Just as difficult as it is to ask for forgiveness, it is also difficult to receive forgiveness. I don't think my dad really thinks about my snittiness or my hate stare or my breaking curfew. But I do. (Especially when I think about someday being the mother of snitty kid.) Forgiving ourselves is a whole other part of this seeking and offering dance. The woman in this Gospel seeks forgiveness, Jesus offers it, and she receives it. She moves on, she forgives herself. This frees her to go out from that Pharisee's home a new person ready to be in new relationship with her community, herself, and her God.

For us, the lesson in this story in the Gospel is that there real, lasting peace offered to us with the forgiveness promised us. I love that hymn, *Blessed Assurance*. It's one of the top ten, in my opinion. I can't help but think the woman having sought and received forgiveness walks out of that Pharisee's home with a peace she could not help

but sing out: Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine! This is my story, this is my song, praising my Savior all the day long. In a real and tangible way, Jesus saves this woman from her mistakes and from a life she seeks to be forgiven of. She leaves peaceful and new, forgiven and free. She shows us the promise we can be assured of. No matter what we bring to Jesus, he will receive us and will offer us what we need in return. Peace. We just have to receive it.