

“Breaking Open the Alabaster Jar”

Luke 7:36-8:3

Grace Church

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The Rev. Dr. Rob Joy

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She had the nerve. What was she thinking? How could she do that? Didn't she know that she did not belong there? How outrageous! Didn't she know her place?

Everyone knows about proper dinner parties. This dinner party Jesus attended was held by Simon (not Simon Peter, just Simon, different guy). He was a leading citizen and may have been a very festive occasion. In our culture and time it would have been an occasion to break out the finest china and silver and linen. Special people would be invited: the mayor, the justice of the peace, the president of the Rotary Club, the Police Chief, the bank president, even the chamber of commerce president all would be there to gobble up the words of Jesus. You see, this party was thrown by a Pharisee and a good number of the guests would naturally be Pharisees as well, it was exactly like inviting members of your own political party. Pharisees, that pesky group who acted as the religious gestapo and who always tried to trap Jesus or at least find out what he really thought. In the other gospels this dinner may have been depicted as a Passover dinner, in which case the finest roast lamb would be served. But tonight, it was hoped that it would be a celebrity roast and the Lamb of God was the main entrée. An innocent little dinner party was a perfect trap.

So in the middle of this grand affair, with the pillars of the community present, with all the right people there, she, whose life is all wrong, creeps in from the back, head down, wrapped up like a blanket in her overwhelming sense of gratefulness to Jesus. It is a debt she knows she can never repay. Everyone glares at her, this woman whose life is nothing but a hot mess. Her eyes which before had gleamed many times in anger, and had countless times stared blankly ahead, numb with the pain of a hundred tragedies and personal mistakes, are filled now to overflowing with tears of love and gratitude at the sight of the only One who really saw *her*. To everyone else, she is about as welcome at this party as a pork chop at a bar mitzvah. She is the one who is unacceptable. She is the unclean one. She is the unholy one. And it is unbelievable she is there. She just doesn't get it. She is clueless near Capernaum.

So, here she comes. She sits at the feet of the reclining Jesus. What does she do with these tears? She washes the feet of Jesus with them! She dries his feet with her hair! Think of how that felt! Ewww! I don't even want to see it done to someone else. And, to top it off, she breaks open an expensive alabaster jar of Chanel No. 5, worth about a year's wages and empties it on his feet! What a scene! As if she, herself, by her very presence, did not wrinkle the sensibilities enough, now that perfume was so intense it wrinkled many noses. She should not be doing this at all! He was a well-known rabbi, a great teacher. She was nothing. As far as her hands went, she should not have let her fingers do the walking onto him! And in those days, a wife let down her hair only in front of her own husband and no other man. What a shameless hussie!

Our host, Simon, a good man, an upstanding citizen, sees all this and understandably is disappointed in Jesus. To himself Simon says, "She's touching her jar of perfume." Simon says, "She's touching her hair!" Simon says, "But don't touch the prophet! OH! She's touching the prophet! You are so out of here! But if he was a true prophet he would not have allowed her anywhere near him. There goes the neighborhood."

But Jesus turns the tables at this dinner party. Without rising from the table, Jesus gives our good host a new list of table manners. He begins with a story, and all good dinner parties have at least one good story told. This was the story that takes the cake tonight.

Two fellows had credit card bills they couldn't pay: one owed the amount of cash it would take to pay a laborer for 500 days, so today at \$10/hour x 8 hours/day x 500 days you get the tidy sum of \$40,000.

The other debtor by the same reckoning owed \$4000, much smaller, but still nothing to sneeze at. The creditor does something rarely done today, or back then: both debts are written off, forgiven, made nothing.

"Well," Jesus asked Simon, "who do you think is more happy about that, who is more thankful?" Simon says, "Is this a trick question? Am I on candid camera?" Finally Simon replies, "I suppose, the one whose debt was greater." Jesus had just put our host on the spot which was not a very polite thing to do. Jesus doesn't rub it in, but reminds Simon he has not done his standard hosting duty very well: no water for the feet, no kiss of greeting, no perfumed oil for Jesus' sweaty brow.

"But," Jesus says, "this woman has bathed my feet with her tears of gratitude she has been constantly kissing my feet for the past 20 minutes

and she broke open a new full container of Chanel no. 5 and poured it over my feet until it's all gone. She's doing this, my dear friend, Simon, because her debt of sin was so extreme. Despite her past, she's been forgiven. Despite her bad reputation around town, she is now God's treasured daughter. Her account is balanced. The books are closed on her life of sin and she is totally grateful. But the person who has only a small debt that is written off, that person is only going to be grateful a little bit."

Hmmm. I wonder, which debtor Simon was. I wonder, which debtor I am. I think I know. Do you wonder, which debtor you are?

This woman's character is amazing. Her example is inspirational. She shows us how to love God. This woman who was nothing in the eyes of the community, but by God's grace, she becomes a great teacher by her example. She is a great citizen in a new community: the Church. She's not the clueless one. Simon is. Simon is not the one most thankful to God. She is. Simon is stuck in his old life. She has just entered a new life.

Her example teaches us about understanding the reality of sin in life: that sin is present in life, that in our losing battle with it, we can only be victorious with Jesus. Her sin was great. She was acutely aware deep down in her heart of her own depravity. There was no hope for her. Not until she met Jesus.

But we're all pretty good people aren't we? We might not see our sin the same serious way she did. We may have only fudged a bit on our tax return. We may have only told little "white lies." We may have only had a few speeding tickets, or we may have had a few more serious scrapes with the law. But as my grandmother said, "Dirt is dirt, and it doesn't matter how much. When ya come to the dinner table, ya gotta git clean." And we can only come clean with Jesus by asking for forgiveness.

This forgiven woman teaches us about not holding anything back from God when we are thankful. When we love God sometimes we just have to show it! We can show our love and gratitude by breaking open our alabaster jars. What I mean by "breaking open our alabaster jars" is that we can justifiably, and without guilt, give to God our very lives and what we hold most precious in our lives. It might be a physical resource, a house, a car, a larger check. It might be physical energy or devotion. It might be doing the things that make a real difference for others. It might even be a relationship that we dedicate to God. In the Old Testament book of First Samuel, Hannah, Samuel's mother, is so ecstatic to be blessed by God with a pregnancy that she vowed to dedicate Samuel to God's service all of

Samuel's life. Sometimes the greatest thing we can do with a blessing from God is to dedicate it to God's use.

But there's a problem. So often though, we aren't grateful. We are like the man who was out in deep water, without a life jacket, the rip-tide having taken him out. He is sure he is going to drown. So, in desperation, splashing about, he bargains with God. What's he got to lose?

"If you save me, Lord, I'll give you everything I own! I'll serve you all my days. I'll be a missionary to Afghanistan, anything, just save me!" As if by magic, he drifts a bit closer to shore, and he notices.

"If you save me Lord, I'll give you all I own! I'll work at an inner city mission, just save me!" He drifts closer yet.

"If you save me Lord, I'll give half of what I own to the poor. I'll even donate my second vacation home to a mission, just save me!" As the waves bounce him, he comes closer still. On tippy toes, his feet barely touch the sandy bottom.

"If you save me Lord I'll begin giving a tenth to the church, and I promise I'll never swear again!" Now his feet feel the bottom and his toes dig in the sand with everything he's got, even as the surf still clutches him. Finally, he is on the beach, panting, exhausted, but he is safe. As he lays there panting for breath, seaweed in his hair, suddenly a new thought comes into his head,

"Good Lord! I didn't know I was such a strong swimmer! I'm really glad I took those swimming lessons back in 8th grade! Wait 'til I tell my buddies about this, how I beat the rip-tide!"

Thankfulness goes out the window when we consider ourselves our own saviors, instead of putting our faith in the overwhelming and unstoppable grace of God in Jesus to save us from the destructive forces in our lives. We are only deceiving ourselves if we think God is not active in our lives.

Many people, many church folks included, take for granted the blessing of God's grace. This truly amazing grace saves us from destruction in this life and the next. Unfortunately, many don't have eyes to see it. And isn't that too bad? A well-known image, from Puritan preacher Jonathan Edwards, is that our lives are held, like a spider over a great fire, by a single thin thread. Destruction can happen at any time. It is only God's grace that strongly and lovingly holds that thread and preserves our life. Now, God doesn't have to hold the thread, but the Good News is, God holds the thread.¹

¹Jonathan Edwards, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God."

This forgiven woman teaches us something very wonderful. No matter how wretched we feel about ourselves, no matter what we've done, no matter if we're not invited to join the yacht club, or the country club, or the Garden club, or the chess club, if we get cut from the team or get a failing grade, if we are bullied or made fun of, God still wants us. God still has a purpose for us. If we feel unacceptable and unclean and unholy, we are still invited to join God's club. The membership dues are paid in full by a loving God and we may come as we are and we are welcomed 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Membership does have its privileges.

So what are we to do with so great a forgiveness? How can we respond in thankfulness? What does God want us to do? We need look no further than our text. What happens next? Road trip! Jesus, the Twelve, Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna, and a whole bunch of other women, possibly including this woman, go on a mission trip through the surrounding cities and villages. What did they do? They got out. They told people about the Good News. There's a new kingdom at hand and it's run by God and you are all invited to join no matter who you are or who you aren't.

We are also called to go out beyond these doors and be God's ambassadors of a new kingdom to those social groups to which we belong: the service clubs, and sports teams, and schools and work places and our friends and families. There is a new reality in Jesus and it changes everything and makes everything better.

The alabaster jar is waiting to be broken open and the contents completely poured out as an offering to God. Shall we? Amen.