

2nd Samuel 11:26-12:10
Galatians 2:15-21
Luke 7:36-8:3

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³⁶One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and took his place at the table. ³⁷And a woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. ³⁸She 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 the ointment. ³⁹Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him—that she is a sinner." ⁴⁰Jesus spoke up and said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." "Teacher," he replied, "Speak." ⁴¹"A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. ⁴²When they could not pay, he canceled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?" ⁴³Simon answered, "I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt." And Jesus said to him, "You have judged rightly." ⁴⁴Then turning toward the woman, he said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. ⁴⁵You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. ⁴⁶You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. ⁴⁷Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little." ⁴⁸Then he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." ⁴⁹But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?" ⁵⁰And he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

8 Soon afterwards he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, ²as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, ³and Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their resources.

People like to shop; some are better at it than others. Shopping is a skill – some view it as part mathematics, part competition. Shopping is not just a question of how much money something costs; that is a very preliminary question. There are other costs. How much time does it take to make the purchase? How much energy will it take? And the thing you buy – how often will you have to paint it? How much will it eat? Does it complain much? How much emotional stability will be gone forever in the making of this purchase?

After all the costs have been considered, the other side of the equation must be factored. What do you get? This is not just a matter of "how much" do you get; this is also a matter of "how much do you need it?"

There is a lot that goes into shopping.

I am a pastor. When people talk to me about shopping, it is usually about church. We do not like to call it "church shopping", but I often hear a comparison of "How much will it cost?" to "What will I get?". Again, how much church costs goes beyond how much money the shopper puts in the collection plate. It has to do with how much energy it takes. How much time. Will one congregation get me more friends than another? Will a congregation cost me more friends than another? Do I have to persuade my family that this is a good thing? Do I have to go to a class to join? Do I have to think about what I believe?

And after the counting of costs, the question comes up..."What will I get?". The opportunity to worship. The blessings of the sacrament of communion. New insights. Meeting people who share your values. Knowing that you are doing what God wants you to do.

Some people weigh the costs and they weigh the benefits...and they decide the question: "Where can I get the most for the least?".

A couple of years ago "The Lutheran" magazine published an article on television religion. The article pointed out some shortcomings and a man wrote the magazine an angry letter. He said he was tired of hearing about "the greed" of television religion. He said television

religion was "the best bargain around". The last time he had gone to church he counted the number of people and looked at the budget and figured that every household represented there would have to give at least a hundred dollars to keep the congregation going. Whereas the fellow on television only asked for \$50.00 a month. The television guy preached a lot better sermon, and you have to consider how much you save on gas getting to and from the church. This fellow was a smart shopper.

People take a kind of shopping list to look for a church. They may be concerned about the quality of a youth group, or the size of a youth group. Or how closely the worship matches their experiences. Or how concerned a congregation is about particular social issues. Or how often the Bible gets mentioned during the sermon. Or any of a hundred other things that Christians should be concerned about, and should make part of their congregational life.

Everybody comes to church to meet Christ. Whatever they think about costs, whatever they think about benefits, everybody comes to church to meet Christ. But when we come to meet Christ and be a part of his church, do we come to see that he meets our standards? Or do we come to meet Christ hoping that the love of God will raise us to his standards?

In Luke's Gospel this morning we have the story of two people who wanted to meet Jesus. They both did what everybody in the church wants to do; they made arrangements to meet with Jesus. But the two people are certainly different. One of the people was a Pharisee named Simon. He wanted to meet Jesus to see if Jesus met *his* standards. He invited Jesus to dinner. Simon was willing to pay a cost to meet Jesus. Simon behaved well; he was a good host. He gave Jesus dinner. He probably planned to spend the evening in intelligent conversation, talking with Jesus and finding out what all the fuss was about. After all, Jesus was making a name for himself as a great teacher, and Simon would find out if he was really all that he was cracked up to be. (Jesus might turn out to be a bargain.) Simon was thinking, "Come, let me meet you, Jesus. I will listen to you try to convince me that you are an important

person. I will see if you measure up to my standards. I will give you a chance to prove yourself. I will measure you up. I will see what you have to offer."

That is how Simon met Jesus. ... Another person met Jesus in this morning's Gospel lesson. She was a sinful woman. She did not come to meet Jesus because she wanted to see how he measured up to her standards. She wanted to meet him because she wanted Jesus to raise her to his standards. She was sinful and she knew it. She wanted Jesus to forgive her sins. She was not there for conversation with an important teacher. She was there because she was overcome by sin and she recognized Jesus as one who could forgive sin.

Just like everyone who comes to church, these two people met with Jesus. One met Jesus to see if he was good enough to be worth his reputation. The other met Jesus because she knew she was a sinner and she wanted to be forgiven.

That's us: The sinner who has come to meet Jesus, the forgiver.

One of the great works of religious history was written by Philip Melancthon. It is called "The Apology of the Augsburg Confession." ("Apology" means an explanation of the Augsburg Confession. It does not mean he's sorry he wrote it.) Melancthon looked at this story of the Pharisee and the sinful woman, and their different ways of coming to Christ, as the best way to understand what we are really doing when we worship God - the best way to understand why we come to meet Christ. "The woman came, believing that she should seek forgiveness of sins from Christ. This is the highest way of worshipping Christ. Nothing greater could she ascribe to him. By looking for the forgiveness of sins from him, she truly acknowledged him as the Messiah. Truly to believe means to think of Christ in this way." (Apology, Art. IV, par. 154)

If you know Jesus can *forgive sins*, then you know that he is God. If you know you are a *sinner*, you want God's forgiveness. If we fail to come to meet Christ in this way, we have lost sight either of the fact that we are sinners or the fact that he is God. And we have reduced our life in the church to just shopping.

Have you ever thought of asking Christ to forgive your sin as a way of worshipping him? It is. It is the highest form of worship. Because asking Christ to forgive is a recognition that Christ *can* forgive. The people sitting around the table in the Bible story we read this morning began to ask themselves, "Who is this, who even forgives sins?" That is the central question. When you ask Jesus to forgive sins, it means you know the answer. You know Jesus Christ is God.

What is our attitude when we gather here to meet Christ? Do we ever come here like Simon the Pharisee did? To hear some helpful teaching, to judge if Jesus' instruction measures up to our standards today? If you ever talk about the scripture readings, or the sermon, or the Sunday School lesson and you say to a member of the family, "That was good today." Do you really mean, "I agreed with that today. I judge the Gospel of Jesus agreed with my point of view...this time." And when we say, "I didn't get much out of that today" or "That won't work; it's just not practical." Do we really mean, "I judge the Gospel of Jesus just isn't up to my standards. I wouldn't do what that scripture said any more than I would let some harlot wash my feet."

We know we are sinful; we know why we have come to meet Jesus. We come to be forgiven. We come to ask God to live in our lives and give us the hope and the strength to serve him. To give us the courage to make new plans. We want Jesus to tell us about our lives and what we should do with them.

This story shows how God operates. God forgives freely. (It's really a bargain.) It will cost your entire life to use all the forgiveness and grace God gives. Divine forgiveness is not just an erasure of past failings, but the creation of the relationship between God and a person – a relationship that gives us depth and meaning.

The woman was sinful. She came to meet Jesus and she was forgiven. She was not forgiven because she loved Jesus; she loved Jesus because she was forgiven. It was not that

she had come up with the purchase price for the grace of God and decided it was a wise investment. Jesus loved her. She was welcomed into a relationship with God. She had been given life and so she loved. She lived her life with God.

The effects of a person's sins are not all removed by forgiveness. We continue to suffer, to be confused, angry, bored, hopeless. We live with the consequences of our actions. But we can do that as people forgiven by God. We live as God's people to give and to serve.

We want to meet Christ. We come to church to do it. We want to make this a congregation that welcomes more and more people to Christ. We want to speak Jesus' message of forgiveness more clearly to more people. We want to strengthen Jesus' work to make this community better. We want Christ's love to go into the homes of people we haven't met yet, so their lives will be better and they can have a place to worship, too.

We are not here this morning like Simon, to give Jesus a chance to make a case for himself. We came to worship. To meet Jesus. To hear his words, "Your sins are forgiven...Your faith has saved you; go in peace."