

Luke 7: 36-51
June 12, 2016
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church

Tony Campolo, a well-known Christian speaker, tells a beautiful and prophetic story. In the early hours of a night in Honolulu, he went to an all-night diner. Gathered there were a small group of prostitutes. They were meeting after work and Tony fell in to talking with them. Despite what we may imagine the life of a prostitute to be, it is hard and often brutal work. Virtually no one goes into this occupation by choice. They are driven by poverty, addiction, and sexual abuse. To persevere in this work prostitutes must sever any connection they have with their own humanity. Their bodies are just a tool of the trade. Such is the age old hypocrisy of our culture we suppress human sexuality behind a façade of morality while an underground industry makes billions of dollars.

Thus it was that the women in the diner were somewhat suspicious of the man who began to engage them in conversation. After all, no one wants to see a prostitute as a human being. No one is interested in her human experience, her aspirations in life for herself or her children. People may want to “save” her from her immoral life. They may want to save her soul from going to hell. Or they may simply be engaging in some weird form of propositioning. Yet the women began to relax in Tony’s presence. Somehow they believed that he was sincerely interested to get to know them *as human beings*.

As they spoke, it came up that one of their number who usually joined them was absent. They talked about a particularly rough time she was having. Then it came out that the next day was this woman’s birthday. Tony suggested that they give her a birthday party at the diner. The

night manager thought it was a good idea and soon the plan was made. The next night the diner was decorated with crepe streamers and balloons and a "Happy Birthday!" banner. Tony brought in a nice cake with the woman's name on it. There were birthday cards and hats.

Escorted by one of her friends, the woman entered the diner and was blown away. When she recovered she announced that no one had ever given her a birthday party. She turned to Tony, who clearly was the instigator of the celebration and asked, "Who are you?" It was only then that he revealed that he was a Christian and the pastor of a church. The woman shook her head.

"No," she said, "that can't be true. If such a church ever existed I would go to it."

In the story we hear from Luke, the setting is not an all-night diner. It is the home of a well-placed religious leader. The people gathered are safe within their comfortable setting with people like them. They have invited Jesus as a somewhat exotic guest who they hope, because of their gracious hospitality, will bless them and their way of life.

Yet as often happens with Jesus, the nice, polite and congenial evening is disrupted. This time it is "a woman of the city who was a sinner." We don't have to do extensive study to know what a woman of the city who is a sinner does for a living! She must have some means for she carries a jar of perfume sealed in a jar. The perfume was used by the woman to enhance her clients' experience and to cover up unwanted body odors. In breaking the neck of the vessel and pouring it on Jesus' feet, this nameless woman was pouring out much of what she had worked so hard to earn. She was pouring out something she could not afford to lose and continue in her line of work.

And yet it is clear that she was doing something more. She was pouring out life that had entrapped her in guilt and shame—a life that had caused her to sever any connection with her humanity. We see her humanity as she weeps; pouring out this precious perfume on Jesus' feet adding to the perfume the streaming flow of her tears; drying his feet with her hair only to wet them again and again.

The host is appalled and offended. His congenial party has been completely upset by this shameless woman's over-the-top display. Of course, he is too polite to say anything; Jesus can hear the host's thoughts as clearly as if he had said them out loud. "If this man was really a prophet he would know this woman is a sinner." The implication is clear. If Jesus is the great spiritual leader people are saying he is, he would refuse the woman's attentions and order her back out into the street, bag and baggage. Instead Jesus gives him a lecture on the priorities of God's Kingdom where the last shall be first and the first shall be last.

It would be easy to launch into a righteous rant about how our middle class suburban churches are like the dinner party of the Pharisee. It would be easy to point fingers at the fact that we are more concerned with polite and friendly behavior than receiving the real pain of the world and engaging in real compassion. But frankly I cannot walk around with a finger always pointed at myself. I am always uncomfortable when people whose lives are broken and bent by hard living disturb my wonderfully ordered life. My motto should be, "Everybody is welcome as long as they behave in a friendly courteous manner."

Yet having said that, I am challenged by this question: "What led this woman of the city to pour out her expensive perfume—which served to cover over the less than pleasant odor of her life-- on Jesus? More to the point, what is the perfume we use which we hope will disguise

what we don't want anyone to know? What would cause us to break the sealed jar and pour it all out in a heaving, weeping release of all we have kept from others, even from ourselves and tried to keep from God?

I can say this: it has to do with Jesus. There continues to be something about Jesus which opens the door of the prison of guilt and shame and fear. There is something about Jesus that lets us know that we are loved in our entirety *as who we are*. It has nothing to do with our good behavior. It has nothing to do with our ability to be pillars of church and community. It has everything to do with our experience *in this life* of our-and every human being's preciousness in the sight of God. It has to do with that unimaginable moment when we can taste a life liberated from the fear of what people think or what compromises we have to make to be accepted in this life. In this life, there are no "what-if's" or "if-only's". There is the feeling of freedom which no government can give or take away.

But to experience this gift that Jesus alone can give, we have to be willing to part this freedom so much that we are willing to shed the perfumes we use to protect our image in the eyes of others so that we can receive the new garments of grace.

Let me say emphatically that in ourselves we cannot do this on our own. This change is given by God alone through Jesus. But the good news is this: the gift has already been given. The only thing God asks of us is to want the gift more than the guilt, regret, fear which keep us from true freedom. If we truly want to be free in the life of Jesus more than anything else we will grow in freedom and in joy. Amen.