

Luke 7:36-50

A few years ago, a professor of divinity at Harvard announced the discovery of an ancient Coptic papyrus fragment in which Jesus purportedly mentions his wife. The announcement led to wide-spread controversy and debate, not only among academics, but within the Church. What was intriguing at the time was not the possible authenticity of the fragment (most scholars now agree it's a fake), but the vehemence with which many Christians responded to its existence.

"OF COURSE Jesus wasn't married!" was the answer routinely given when asked. "He couldn't have been married! He was divine!" In other words, sure, Jesus was human ... but, well, not that human. He was holy. Antiseptic. Immaculate. Heaven forbid that the Son of God might have been so embodied. So sensual!

In her book, *An Altar in the World*, theologian Barbara Brown Taylor, tells a related story about visiting a beautiful old church in Alabama. Having arrived for the service too early, she stood for a while in front of the altar, admiring a mural of Jesus emerging from his tomb. Though the painting was impressive, Taylor felt that something was off; Jesus looked too ethereal, too unreal. After gazing at the mural for several seconds, she realized what was missing: Jesus had no body hair. Without thinking, she turned and shared her realization with the nearest parishioner, a polite, put-together woman with expensive clothes and a flawless manicure.

"He has the arms of a six-year-old. His chest is as smooth as a peach." The parishioner's smile froze, and she stared at Taylor in contemptible horror. 'I

can't believe you're saying this,' she said without moving her red lips. 'I just can't believe you're saying this to me.'

Christians, Taylor concludes, often find themselves "in the peculiar position of being followers of the Word Made Flesh who neglect our own flesh or worse — who treat our bodies with shame and scorn." "Here we sit," says Taylor, "with our souls tucked away in this marvellous luggage, mostly insensible to the ways in which every spiritual practice begins with the body."

This week's Gospel confronts our shame head-on. No matter how hard we try to theologize or intellectualize it away, the story is naked-making. It exposes, it confronts, it directs our gaze. It's a story about the body. What the body is. What the body knows.

Feet. Tears. Perfume. Hair. All four Gospels tell it, the scandalous story of a woman who dared to love Jesus in the flesh — to love his spirit and his body with her own. Each writer frames the story differently, to suit his own thematic and theological concerns, but that hardly matters; the story at its core remains the most sensual, most shocking one in the New Testament. If it doesn't embarrass us, we're not paying attention.

In Luke's version, the story is set early in Jesus's ministry, at the home of a Pharisee named Simon. No doubt curious about the young rabbi garnering both praise and outrage in the surrounding villages, Simon invites Jesus to dinner. After all, why not check out the would-be prophet from Nazareth? Perhaps he'll have some fascinating things to say about religion. Maybe he'll impress the other dinner guests with a nifty miracle or two — wouldn't that be

a credit to Simon, the host? If nothing else, Jesus's presence might make for some interesting chit-chat around the table.

So the invitation is extended — and accepted. The guests arrive on the appointed evening, and as they recline around an impressively laden table, Simon settles in for a few hours of good food and lively conversation.

Enter the woman with the alabaster jar. In Luke's account, the woman is unnamed and unwelcome — "a woman in the city, who was a sinner." How exactly she crashes the party, we don't know, but she manages to get in the door, approach the table, kneel quietly behind Jesus, and let down her hair. Now a decent woman never loosened her hair in public. A woman's hair was her glory. To unbind it was erotic. The act was saved for the most private moments with her husband when he, with pleasure, pulled out the pins which bound it and watched it fall like black silk. Women of the street, however, advertised their availability with unbound hair.

While God-knows-what transpires between the dinner guests, the woman bends over Jesus and begins to cry.

She soaks Jesus's feet with her tears, caresses them dry with her hair, repeatedly kisses his soles, his toes, and his ankles, and finally breaks open her alabaster jar to anoint his salty skin with a costly perfume. As far as we know, Jesus doesn't say a word. Neither does the woman. But they communicate volumes.

Can you imagine the scene? I wonder if the conversation around the table

faltered as the woman began to cry. I wonder if the temperature rose a few significant degrees, and everyone in the room reached simultaneously for the water jug. I wonder where the men looked — or didn't dare to look — as the woman wrapped Jesus's feet in her lustrous hair. I wonder if Jesus — never one to make things easy — captured Simon's gaze and held it, extending the discomfort, forcing his host to imaginatively experience every searing kiss that grazed Jesus's skin.

The temptation here is to deflect. To minimize. "Perhaps it wasn't such a big deal in the first century." "Perhaps people in that culture were more demonstrative than we are today." "Showing affection like that was probably normal back then."

No. No, it wasn't. The Gospel writer takes great pains to describe just how scandalous the woman's behaviour was in that time and in that place; Simon is nothing less than disgusted — not only with the woman, but with Jesus who tolerates her. Specifically, it's the woman's touch that makes Simon squirm with indignation:

"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."

Luke sets the woman's story in the theological context of sin and forgiveness. Those who are forgiven little, love little, but those who are forgiven much, love lavishly. Simon's love is thin in this story because he doesn't recognize his need for grace. The woman, in contrast, knows full well the extent of her own sin - and the wide embrace of Jesus's forgiveness, so her love for him

is boundless. Needless to say, this is an important lesson, and Jesus teaches it beautifully in the parable of the creditor and the debtor that he shares with Simon.

The more interesting part of this story is how much it conveys without language. What happens between Jesus and the weeping woman happens skin to skin. The woman rehearses no repentance speech, and Jesus, in turn, pronounces no lengthy absolution. The woman never says, "I need you," or "Thank you so much," or "I love you."

Her contrition, her worship, her yearning, and her love are enacted wholly through her body, and Jesus receives them into his own body with gratitude, love, tenderness, and pleasure. The holy sacraments here are skin, salt, sweat, and tears. The instruments of worship are perfumed feet and ardent kisses. This is not a polite piety of the mind; this is physical extravagance. It's what one writer calls, "A Sabbath of the skin." And Simon misses it entirely. Simon misses the sacred transaction happening at his own table.

Jesus asks him: "Simon, do you see this woman?" It's a cutting question. Because no, Simon doesn't see her. He doesn't see her humanity, her generosity, her capacity for deep and embodied love. Neither, in fact, does he see Jesus's humanity — the dusty feet in need of cool water, the sun-baked skin in need of fragrant ointment, the ever-giving, ever-sacrificing Son of Man in need of reciprocity, affection, and loving touch. Though he accuses Jesus of ignorance, Simon is the one who is both blind and ignorant in this story. In his eyes, Jesus needs to remain a curiosity, an idea, an abstraction — and one can't love an abstraction.

Now, Simon needs Jesus to remain "a prophet," and the woman to remain "a sinner." His own identity — "a Pharisee" — depends on every other identity at his table remaining fixed. But this is exactly what the woman unhinges when her body enters the room. With her hair, her tears, her touch, she forces each guest back into his own skin. With her more perfect, more radical, and more offensive hospitality — a hospitality attentive to mind, soul, and body — she confronts everyone in the room with their common humanity. Do you see this woman? The weeper? The washer? The anointer? She's the one who sees and knows. She, too is a prophet.

A story is told about a guest preacher: The church I grew up in was known for its famous fried chicken dinners. Whenever we had one, it would be announced on the radio and in the paper bringing an extra big crowd that morning.

Pastor Simmons especially liked to do them whenever he invited guest speakers. One Sunday, when I was eight, we had a guest speaker. I don't remember his name or where he had come from. I just remember that we were going to have a chicken dinner after church that day and the sanctuary was full.

I also remember that the guest speaker was really nice. During the children's time he called all of us kids to the front and told us a funny story. Then, at the end of children's time, a three year old girl, named Emily, got up and crawled into the guest speaker's lap. She was wearing a plastic necklace made of pink beads. She held them up and said, "I love you, preacher," then she put

it around the guest speaker's neck.

He looked at the little girl, smiled, and said, "Thank you. You are very special and God loves you." All the adults in the pews whispered to each other, "Isn't that so precious?" After children's time, came the sermon. The guest speaker preached about God's love and forgiveness. But, it was really hard to focus with the smell of fried chicken coming from downstairs.

Downstairs, I was sitting at the kids table with a chicken leg, a roll, and a heap of banana pudding. I noticed that the guest speaker was standing at the back of the line. That was odd. Usually, Pastor Simmons would begin the dinner by inviting the guest speaker to pray for the meal and then insist that the guest speaker and his family go first in the line. He must have forgotten to do that.

Right behind the guest speaker in line was Linda Jones. Everyone in town knew who Linda Jones was. She lived in a trailer without electricity. She was quite skinny, she never wore a bra, and she smelled bad. The older boys used to tease each other that Linda Jones had slept with their fathers. It wasn't true, but that gives you an idea of her reputation. She was probably an addict who was having sex with people for drug money.

Linda Jones tended to show up at whichever Church was having a meal that Sunday morning. She had come to our altar and got saved many times just before a chicken dinner. One time, she came to one of our pot lucks and the sound system went missing. Pastor Simmons found it at the pawnshop a couple of days later. Many of the women claimed that on other occasions

she had stolen money out of their purses. The church had tried to help her many times but she always wound up right back how she started. Pastor Simmons said there was only so much you could do for someone who didn't want to help themselves.

So, Linda Jones was just behind the guest speaker in line. From what I could tell, they talked for a little while and then she abruptly left the room. I remember everyone kind of being relieved. Of course Linda was always welcome at the church but we didn't always know what to do with her. She was known to make a scene.

The guest speaker looked around the room for a place to sit. Usually, the guest speaker sat with Pastor Simmons and his family. But, by now his table was already full. The guest speaker came and sat at the table next to the kids table. About ten minutes later, Linda Jones returned carrying a little pink box. She marched right up to the guest speaker and, to everyone's shock, she pulled out his seat and proceeded to sit in his lap.

Suddenly the room was quiet. Everyone was embarrassed and uncomfortable. Linda Jones didn't look around or seem to care that the women were covering their mouths. She sat there in the guest speaker's lap and opened up her pink box. When she opened it, I could hear the faint tinkling of music. And I could see a tiny ballerina turning in front of a little mirror. When she heard the music, Linda began to cry. It seemed like she hadn't heard it in a very long time.

When the song was finished playing, she reached into the box and pulled out

a gold necklace. It was beautiful. It had a sapphire locket on the end of it shaped like a heart. Even as a kid, I knew that it was very old and very expensive. That it was probably her most prized possession. It might have been the one thing left in that box that she hadn't pawned for drugs.

Still sitting in his lap, she wrapped her arms around the guest speaker's neck. She was nearly cheek to cheek with him as she fastened it. Through her tears, she whispered, "I love you, preacher." We all looked at the guest speaker. What would he say? He looked at her and smiled. He said warmly with tender affection, "Thank you, Linda. You are very special and God loves you."

Now everyone looked at Pastor Simmons. He was sitting at his usual spot. His face was red and his expression was stern. He was clearly not pleased by this whole display. Could you blame him? Even as a kid, I knew the whole thing was weird and very inappropriate. Pastor Simmons looked like he was about to say something but the guest speaker beat him to it.

"Pastor Simmons, I have a question for you?" "Go ahead, Brother," he said. "Pastor Simmons, Imagine two people owe you money. One of them owes you \$500 and the other owes you \$50,000. Neither of them is able to pay you back. But because you're a good Christian, you decide to forgive both of their debts. Which of the two do you think would love you more?" Pastor Simmons replied. "I suppose it would be the one who had the bigger debt forgiven."

The guest speaker smiled. "Exactly! Look at this exemplary woman! I'm your guest and you didn't even invite me to sit with you — And here she is sitting

in my lap. You didn't introduce me and ask me to pray for the meal. But here she is telling me that she loves me. You didn't give me first pick of the fried chicken and here she is giving me her most valuable possession. Pastor Simmons, this is the Gospel truth: her many sins have been forgiven. You can tell by the great love she shows! But whoever has been forgiven little loves little."

The guest speaker looked at Linda and said, "I forgive you! Go in peace." Smiling with tears of Joy, Linda Jones left. And no one in town ever saw her again. Occasionally, I think of them.

Sometimes, as I'm drifting off to sleep, I can still hear the faint tinkling of that pink music box. And I see Linda sitting in the guest speaker's lap and tenderly putting that locket around his neck. And I wonder: Why did she do that? What had he said to her? What did she know that none of us knew? To this day, I still remember his loving gaze. It haunts me. Who was he? Where was he from? And why was he able to say, "I forgive you?"

Most of the time, we see our body as something to shrink, starve, conquer, or tame. We see its flaws so much more clearly than we see its God-ordained dignity and beauty. Rarely — so rarely — do we see it as a vehicle for worship, love, hospitality, and grace. But if we can't see our own body as God's temple, if we won't embrace it as pleasing and delightful to its Creator, how will we ever see or embrace others? "Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself," Jesus told his wary disciples after the Resurrection. "Touch me and see. A ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have."

We are people of the Incarnation, called to look, to see, to break bread, share wine, and wash feet. Can we learn to see our embodied lives, our sensory lives, as fully implicated in our lives with God? Can we move past contempt, squeamishness, and fear, and offer him our whole selves? "This is my body," Jesus says, "given for you." Touch me and see.

Amen.

PRAYERS FOR SUNDAY FEBRUARY 23, 2025

Let us come into God's presence with thanksgiving and joy, bringing all the sick, the suffering, the marginalised, the refugees and the uprooted before God, knowing that God can dispel our darkness with the light of Christ. May we and our communities be lights that guide others to Christ Jesus as we offer you our prayers.

Compassionate God, who sent Jesus Christ to deliver us from all manner of injustices and inequalities, create in us new hearts and enlarged visions, to see the image of God in every person irrespective of background, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. May we be generous in our love of others as we work towards ending misunderstanding and injustice.

We pray for all in your world, who suffer the horrors of modern slavery. Your Son came to bring good news to the poor and freedom for the oppressed. We pray for all working to combat modern slavery and to end human trafficking: governments and agencies; churches and faith leaders; businesses, charities, and individuals. May we be voices against oppression and channels of the transforming power of the gospel. Help us to work for a world where human beings are valued, where no one is enslaved, and no one used against their will for another's pleasure or need.

We pray for those whose lives are lived in the turmoil of immigration, in the desperation of poverty, in the struggles for freedom and justice, in the weariness of war; in the Middle East, Ukraine, South Sudan, Haiti, the Congo and conflicts throughout the world. We pray for civilians caught up in the wars: aid and medical personnel, volunteers and journalists. We acknowledge the courage of journalists and media workers. In the Israel Gaza war 85 journalists and media workers are confirmed dead: 16 are reported injured, 3 missing, and 25 are reported arrested. Protect those who offer their life to tell our stories.

We pray for our churches in the changing world; for Bishops Susan and Kathy, Bishop Anna, Anglican Primate Anne Germond, Bishops of the Moravian Worldwide church, The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land, our sister congregation San Juan Camino d'Esperanze and Pastor Ana Maria Jara in Peru, Christ the King Lutheran in Surrey - Rev. Nicolas Alexandre, and all who serve in full communion congregations. We pray for all pastors, priests, deacons, musicians and volunteers. Today, on Deaconal Sunday, we lift up all deacons and pray for their ministries.

We pray for all in need. Provide caring communities for all who are burdened by guilt, shame, and addiction. We pray for all who are facing illness, medical treatments and therapies, life altering diagnosis, prolonged healing, and at times

feel lost and look to you for hope, comfort, and peace. We pray that the Lord will lay His hands on them.

Creator God, give us the will to mold this world ever closer to your heart's desire and the patience to work with what we have, where we are. Many of us work hard to inspire and maintain our planet, to conserve it and enjoy the fruits it holds, so we pray that those working against it and causing its destruction from global warming, are halted in their ignorance of its fragility.

Lord, although we are in awe of the beauty of this earth, we are so often shocked and disillusioned by the magnitude and frequency of natural disasters: floods, fires, extreme temperatures, droughts, and earthquakes. Help us, as we seek your comfort and understanding during these events.

Caring God, as we humans appear to become ever more polarised between the rich and powerful and the poor and powerless, we ask You to enlighten and inspire the strong to strengthen the weak. Help heal divisions between those who consume too much and those who have nothing to consume. Help those with plenty be fuelled with a desire to share with those who have little. Assist us in healing our flawed society so that we may cherish each other and delight in living together in peace and harmony.

Creator God, may we proclaim your good news to the world, in the ways we are each able and in ways which can be heard by those around us. May the fire of your spirit live within us declaring your glory.

Amen.

With joy and gladness let us pray as Jesus taught us.

Our Father.....