

Luke 7:36-50

*One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and took his place at the table. And 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. She 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. Now 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.' Jesus spoke up and said to him, 'Simon, I have something to say to you.' 'Teacher,' he replied, 'speak.' 'A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he cancelled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?' Simon answered, 'I suppose the one for whom he cancelled the greater debt.' And Jesus said to him, 'You have judged rightly.' Then turning towards 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. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore, 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.' Then he said to her, 'Your sins are forgiven.' But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, 'Who is this who even forgives sins?' And he said to the woman, 'Your faith has saved you; go in peace.'*

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### **On our Birthday: The 327<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of King's Chapel Seen In a New Light**

On Sunday afternoons, I love to lie down with the Sunday newspapers and languidly make my way through every section, reading to my heart's delight. So, week by week, I end up turning to the little magazine called Parade, the most widely read magazine in the US, tucked inside hundreds of Sunday newspapers, big and small, all over the country. Usually glancing through it is a humbling experience, reminding me how few celebrities I've even heard of, but it somehow remains a stubborn part of my Sunday paper reading routine; hope springs eternal that some day I'll be less obtuse.

Last week the Parade magazine included this true story – about a family of four in Ohio. Perhaps you read it.

A little over a year ago, a father named Brad was driving home with his two children, an 18 year old daughter and 16 year old son. Brad had just gotten out of prison, where he and his wife had served several years for growing marijuana. Today his son had been in court for punching another student, an aggression that

seemed to be growing, and he'd been sentenced to 16 hours of community service. Brad's daughter had gotten pregnant while Brad and his wife were in jail, and now the daughter was struggling as a single mom in high school, wondering if she'd ever get her degree. Brad hadn't been able to find work since he'd been released – no one wanted to hire an ex-con - and now they were late picking up his wife from her job....

Well, I now knew just where this article was going, and I was ready to skip to the next story. Because really, What had this dad been thinking, breaking the law with drugs? Of course his kids were messed up – how could they not be with a father like him? And Brad not getting a job – well, he'd made his own bed. Being late to pick up his wife – ah yes, clearly they were speeding and....

But I was all wrong. It wasn't Brad who had the accident – Brad and his kids came upon one, hearing a horrible crash, then seeing the sight. They jumped from their car, rushed to a mangled pickup truck that had rolled over twice, flames all across its underside. The man inside was tall and strong, but he couldn't get the door open. Brad, an amateur boxer, pulled on the door with all his strength, then wedged himself between the door and frame, somehow prying it open with his body. Though Brad had yelled at his kids to stay away, they were there – and it was the kids who dragged the dazed and bleeding man out of the truck just before it was engulfed in flames.

The rescue was reported in the local Ohio paper, and Brad began to notice that rather than steering clear of him on the sidewalk, townsfolk began to come up to him and thank him for what he had done. His son's grades began to turn around, as the son felt he had a dad he could respect.

Townsfolk slowly learned more about Brad's story – that his troubles had started when his grandfather had died, and Brad became severely depressed. Brad had self-medicated with drink then drugs. His small home improvement business began to fall apart, and to make ends meet, Brad and his wife began to grow marijuana in the basement. When they were arrested, everyone in their little town saw the banner headlines. During prison, Brad kept hoping he could get out and turn things around, prove to people that he was a changed man, prove it to himself, his wife, his kids. But when Brad returned home, no one would give him a chance to do that. He fought to remain sober, day by day.

After the crash, the man they'd rescued – Matt Sterling -- befriended Brad and his family, grateful that they'd saved his life. Matt owned a small local restaurant, and he hired Brad's wife as a waitress; when Brad's daughter did complete high school, Matt catered her graduation party for free. Brad and his family were now seen in a new light. Forgiven. Restored.

The headline to the article said it this way: "Local Heroes: Brad Ray and his kids saved one man's life. Turns out their own lives were saved, too."

What a difference, when we see things in a new light. What power when we can be seen in a new light. What despair, when we remain trapped, unable to begin afresh.

In our sacred story from the New Testament, the Pharisee plays the role I did, as I began reading the article, convinced I knew the likely outcome once I was aware of Brad's past. Brad had been in prison for growing marijuana; the woman who snuck into the Pharisee's home and anointing Jesus' feet was known by all to be a grievous sinner – doesn't the past determine the future? People don't really change! Once someone has proven themselves untrustworthy, we cut them off. Fool me once, shame on you; fool me twice, shame on me. Anyone with standards, anyone with insight, knows this! So reasoned the Pharisee. So was reasoning, I confess – oh I confess, at the beginning of Brad's story.

But Jesus sees us all in a different light. Where the world, with all its supposed insight, saw a sinful woman, Jesus saw the woman's potential, and her great love. Jesus may have known why she had done what she had, as the townsfolk in Ohio later learned about Brad's story. But even without that, Jesus knew she needed a fresh start, and he gave it to her, changing her life. As Brad's was, once the town's people began to give him and his family another chance, too. Jesus thinks people can really change. He risks forgiving and being the fool. Because that's the only way any of us have a chance, really.

Because dear friends, who of us has not done things we regret? Who of us has not suffered because of actions of another? Without forgiveness, we are trapped. We're left with hating ourselves for what we've done or left undone. Or burning with anger and resentment towards those who did us wrong.

Or we can see each other in a new light.

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Sometimes the one we need to see in a new light is ourselves – that's what Jesus wanted the Pharisee to do. To see that the woman was not less than the Pharisee – if anything, the rich and educated Pharisee had behaved less well than she. The Pharisee had not welcomed Jesus with gracious hospitality, but the woman had – bathing Jesus' feet, greeting him with a kiss of gratitude.

Sometimes our need is to see ourselves in a new light, to see ourselves as the ones in need of forgiveness. That was true for King David, too. David, the boy who slew the giant Goliath with a slingshot, is now the grown and powerful King of all Israel. David sees beautiful Bathsheba, the wife of his loyal soldier Uriah, and David wants Bathsheba for his own. David arranges to have Uriah abandoned and killed in battle, and God's prophet Nathan comes to visit. The prophet tells David of a poor man, with only one beloved lamb, and rich man who steals the little lamb, slaughtering it

for a meal. David is outraged at the rich man's greed. Then Nathan shouts: You are the man!

David had to see himself in a new light, and it was excruciating.

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Time – years passing – casts a new light on things, too.

My time with you at King's Chapel is still measured in weeks and months – 13 weeks and soon, the three month mark. But King's Chapel's history is measured in decades and centuries – 327 years marked on this Sunday.

So in the few moments that I've been able to in these last three months, I've taken the old key that unlocks the Parish House archives, and read, read, read all that I can about our roots. I've barely scratched the surface, I know, but what a rich and vital story all these documents tell. I've also taken time with many of you, to just listen, listen, listen, to your stories; I want to hear many more. For again the powerful history is told, in your own lives, in your lives dedicated to this church.

I'm learning the history of the many who have sat in just the pews in which you sit, of the preachers who stand just where I do now, of the women and men and children outside these granite walls who watched us, debated with us, came through those doors to join us, shook their heads in disbelief or anger or awe at the freedom of new religious thought born here – and who together, with us, the people of this city, shaped our country and its ideals; shaped religious thought in America; shaped lives.

Time does cast a new light on things. So, in the annals of our 200<sup>th</sup> birthday, in 1886, the historical sermons offered by the Rev. Henry Wilder Foote, needed to remind the gathered of what all the fuss have been about, when Puritan founders of this colony recoiled at the notion of a King's Chapel erected on their soil. With a gentleness not present in those first heated days, the preacher two hundred years later could identify the strands of truth found on each side of the argument.

In the new light of time passed, and a new nation born, Rev. Foote could name the strengths of the independence the Puritans insisted upon, to worship God and live separate from the dominant religion of their homeland; but also, their need to be more open to religious traditions not their own, to respect that not all who lived in this fledgling city could worship God most fully in Puritan style, to make some space for those who longed for the familiar prayer book words and tunes with which their own faith had been formed.

So on the history of King's Chapel has gone: all of us learning from one another, shaping one another, and most important, seeking to live lives that reflected Christian teachings, as best we understood them. All the debates over style or

dogma were always rooted, at their best, in the question of how to follow Jesus of Nazareth.

Today's question remains the same – how do we best follow Jesus? How do we share what we have glimpsed, week by week, and year by year, in our own lives, about the power of forgiveness to change lives, about the value Jesus gave to every single person – from the weeping woman to the Pharisee – always seeking to spend time with them, to share a table with them, to reprove them when needed, but to ultimately love and cherish them, seeing in them – seeing in you – all that you are, all that God has dreamed for you.

What now, is God dreaming of for you, for this place? What is needed in this city today, with its hurts and longings, its broken hearts, its injustices untended. Where are we needed, and where do we most need to be, to follow the man from Nazareth?

I don't know just the shape our future will take, but this I do know: our tradition of independence and freedom of religious thought is desperately needed in our time, perhaps even more that it has been in the past. Others may preach today's lectionary lesson of forgiveness, but it comes only at a heavy cost, where the bottom line is to believe in one narrow way, or be damned. As the tract I was handed this week on Boston Common asked in bold red letters, Heaven or Hell? Reading it, it was clear where the writers would have placed me.

The Christianity understood and preached here – and with God's help, the Christianity lived by us each day, as best we can – is one of freedom and inclusiveness that sees the sinful woman and loves her, not a religion that damns her forever, as the Pharisee did. As I almost did of Brad, when I began the Parade article, sure I knew its direction.

We know that hurtful, wrong actions have consequences, and do cause pain. It was true for King David. And for the woman with the alabaster jar. And for the Pharisee. All caused and experienced hurt. But to David, God said, Your sins are forgiven. To all, even the woman whose sins were "grievous," Jesus said, you are forgiven.

Dear ones, let us always see this place, and one another in a new light, the radiant light that forgiveness brings. Let's see ourselves as the city around us sees us – what do they see now, and what shall they see?

I believe they will see a place of progressive Christian thought that honors all! A place where questions can be asked and answers given, in love and respect. A place that doesn't just speak, but acts, that forgives and trusts, that is grateful, grateful, grateful, like the woman, for all the Love that God has given us, and in gratitude, returns that love, spilling out generously, pouring over others in love. Love they can feel in their lives, when their feet and souls are weary and worn.

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Brad seemed just like another petty ex-con. But he saved Matt's life, and in return Matt gave Brad back his dignity. The story hasn't had a storybook ending – Brad still doesn't have a full-time job, but the family is making do. And in some of the time he has free, Brad has started an afterschool program for kids struggling, giving them sports to help raise their own sense of self worth. There, at that program, he's not an ex-con. He's "coach."

There are so many Brads and Matts. They, we, all of us can stand in amazement at the changes and turns of history. So forward through the ages we go – in God's forgiving grace. I'm excited for all that lies ahead!

*Forward through the ages, in unbroken line,  
Move the faithful spirits, at the call divine.  
Gifts of differing measure, hearts of one accord  
Manifold in service, one the sure reward.  
Forward through the ages, in unbroken line,  
Move the faithful spirits, at the call divine.*