

Have you noticed that we remember uncomfortable and embarrassing moments with more clarity than comfortable & happy ones? It doesn't seem fair. Sometimes it feels like my body anticipates awkward moments, and then records these memories in high-definition 3D.

When I was a freshman at Taylor University, I was asked out on a blind date where all the girls from a particular dorm floor had setup a group date. This particular "pick a date" was a lot more formal than most. A black tie dinner on campus and then a Christmas concert featuring Sandi Patty and the Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra. I sat down to dinner in my best suit and tie, my date in an attractive red dress. I ask about her, as we enjoy some Italian food. I'm from a yuppie city suburb, she's from rural southern Indiana. She tells me that a lot of girls can't hold their own on a farm, but she can do anything the boys can. In fact, she proudly tells me that she can castrate bulls. My mental recorder is spinning into overdrive.

Dinner is over and all the young people are divvying up into vehicles to carpool the hour-plus drive to Indianapolis. But, my date says we're not going with them. We'll take her car, but I should drive because "I'm the man." No sooner than I had sat down, she brandishes a mangled metal can opener from the dash. She calmly but sternly warns me that her father had sharpened it up and she wouldn't hesitate to "use it if I tried anything."

I can remember that date like it was yesterday... *And now we've been married 20 years!*

I'm just kidding, babe. That wasn't Steph. I'm just kidding.

Really did happen. Wasn't my wife.

Speaking of awkward and uncomfortable moments....the story we're going to look into this morning was just that. Everyone who was there would have cringed at what they saw, they'd be uncomfortable, all except Jesus. And my prayer is that the beautiful response by our Savior will draw you more in love with Him. I'll read from Luke 7:36-50, but before I do, let's pray:

Luke 7:36-50

"One of the Pharisees asked [Jesus] to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and reclined at table. And behold, a woman of the city, who was a sinner, when she learned that he was reclining at table in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster flask of ointment, and standing behind him at his feet, weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears and wiped them with the hair of her head and kissed his feet and anointed them with the ointment."³⁹ Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner."⁴⁰ And Jesus answering said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." And he answered, "Say it, Teacher."

⁴¹ "A certain moneylender had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty.⁴² When they could not pay, he cancelled the debt of both. Now which of them will love him more?"⁴³ Simon answered, "The one, I suppose, for whom he cancelled the larger debt." And he said to him, "You have judged rightly."⁴⁴ Then 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 wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair.⁴⁵ You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss my feet.⁴⁶ You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment.⁴⁷ Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven—for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little."⁴⁸ And he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven."⁴⁹ Then those who were at table with him began to say among themselves, "Who is this, who even forgives sins?"⁵⁰ And he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

This is an extraordinary story, both then and now. I imagine it caused quite a stir. It would even today! Jesus was invited to this banquet by a Pharisee, and given his past run-ins with Pharisees, this would have caught people's attention. **Why was the invitation given?** Was Simon one who genuinely wanted to hear from Jesus, like Nicodemus? And rather than coming at night, Simon dared to meet with Jesus over a meal? Or is it more likely that this was yet another attempt to catch Jesus, to trap him into condemning himself, as had been tried on a number of other occasions. Whatever the case, Jesus accepted the invitation.

Now, a private dinner in Jesus' day could take on the appearance of a public event. Homes had open courtyards and uninvited spectators could stand around, observing the guests, the festivities and the conversation. But, Jesus, along with those invited, would have been around the table, reclined on couches, leaning on the left elbow, keeping his right hand free to eat and with his body and feet stretched away from the table, sandals removed of course.

Then, "behold, a woman of the city, who was a sinner..."

Most commentators believe this woman was likely a prostitute, although it's only implied in the text. Whatever her sin was, it was considered egregious, and she was notorious. She is an uninvited and unwanted guest, but she finds her way into the house somehow and stands behind Jesus.

There is already a sweeping discomfort in the room, but the discomfort is only beginning. In the midst of what would have been a festive and happy occasion, the woman begins to cry. She had not come to cause a scene or dishonor Jesus. She came, it appears, intending to anoint him with perfume, an ointment...But as she does, the tears come. And they just won't stop. Her tears are falling on his feet, she leans over, lets down her hair and, with it, tenderly wipes his feet. Then, while kneeling there, she begins to kiss his feet. Now make no mistake, she's humiliating herself, but seems uninhibited by what everyone must be thinking.

Can you imagine this scene? Can you imagine the shock that would have cut through the room?...And how do you imagine how you would have felt, what would you have thought, if you had been there? If it had happened today, the bystanders would have already had their phones out...this would be going up on social media..."Can you believe this? What is she doing?"

For a woman to let down her hair in public was so scandalous that it was grounds for divorce.

And what about this alabaster flask of perfume that she brought? The text doesn't give much detail, but I learned that there was a practice of wearing perfume in a small decorative bottle as a necklace, as a form of jewelry. It was an expensive and attractive cosmetic. The fragrance of which would whisp its way from a narrow neck on the top of the bottle, enhancing the allure of the woman that wore it. To 'pour it out' meant to break off the top of the bottle, emptying the contents all at once.

The text doesn't record a reaction from Jesus at all. But, Simon the Pharisee sees this commotion and display...and thinks Jesus the fool, pitying him for being stupid...but he doesn't say anything out loud. Notice the passage says that "he said to himself, 'If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner.'"

This unspoken thought is so revealing about what Simon thinks of this woman, what he thinks of Jesus, and perhaps even more significant, what he thinks of himself. And ALSO, don't miss the delightful irony of Simon thinking to himself that Jesus is no prophet, and then Jesus immediately knowing and calling out his unspoken thoughts. (So good)

And Jesus answering said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." Uh oh!

And (not knowing any better) he answered, "Say it, Teacher."

"A certain moneylender had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he cancelled the debt of both. Now which of them will love him more?" Simon answered, "The one, I suppose, for whom he cancelled the larger debt." And he said to him, "You have judged rightly." Then turning toward the woman he said to Simon, "Do you see this woman?"

Jesus is getting ready to turn the table...and expose *Simon's* lack of understanding. He lays out a brilliant parable and then asks, "Do you see this woman?" His question is far deeper than surface level. Do you SEE her Simon...Really? His proud heart only saw what type of person she was. He saw her bad decisions, her messy past, her despised and marginalized status...only Jesus really saw HER.

And then comes the twist: Jesus exposes Simon's own lack of hospitality, the stinginess of his own heart:

I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss 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 are many, are forgiven—for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little." And he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven."

Jesus wasn't uncomfortable with this situation. Instead, he uses this uncomfortable moment to juxtapose two very different people and their very different hearts. One leaves affirmed and accepted, the other is dismissed and condemned. See, for likely very different motives, both want to be with Jesus, both want to hear from Jesus, but Simon is examining him...interviewing him...his heart is cool, detached, maybe even a little angry. The woman's heart is unrestrained and undone.

And don't miss the courage it would have taken for this woman to come...to push past people who hate her, or have used her, all of whom think she doesn't belong. But, Jesus is unbothered by what people are thinking...He is focused on what is true and he honors her.

When this woman broke open and poured out her perfume, I believe this was even more than just a generous gesture. This necklace of perfume was the 'tool of her trade', this was her allure...and when she snaps the neck of this bottle and pours out its contents, she is, in essence, changing the direction of her life. What had been most precious to her now was being poured out at the feet of her savior. It calls to mind the words... "Take my love, my Lord, I pour, at thy feet its treasure store. Take myself, and I will be ever, only, all for thee."

One of the questions that sometimes comes up: "Is this saying the woman is forgiven because of her loving gesture?" It can read that way at first glance, but be certain that Jesus is pointing to her loving actions as EVIDENCE of her forgiveness, not as the cause. That's made clear in how Jesus constructs his parable, as well as countless other places in Scripture.

Another question that comes to mind: "*Will those who have a more sinful past inherently love Jesus more?*" It seems like the story says "Yes." And, you know, I've heard this question expressed in another way over the years. I've heard Christians say that they don't have much of a testimony...they say, "I wasn't saved out of a gang or out of drug addiction. I didn't live a wild life and don't have much of a story to tell." So a fair question: can you have BIG love if you don't have BIG sins?

Therein lies the real genius of this parable! Although the sums of which the debtors have been forgiven are wildly different...50 denarii is roughly two months wages...500 denarii is closer to two years wages. They seem so far apart and Simon and Jesus affirm as much. But, the penalty of these debts are the same. If you couldn't pay, you went to jail. The debtors go to prison unless the debt is forgiven.

The only way for those debts to be forgiven is for the lender to eat the cost, right? (That's something our politicians don't seem to understand.) To 'forgive' a debt is only to transfer it. Somebody has to pay.

Friends, that's what Jesus did for us on the cross.

I think that's why I'm so personally drawn to this story. At the end of the day, the significant difference between the woman and Simon isn't that she's a worse sinner – it's even possible she had not been – the difference is that she knew she was a sinner and that she needed Jesus.

This passage is a marvelous “diagnostic” for us anytime we revisit it: A test to examine the health and the affections of our own heart.

So which heart are we in this story? I recognize the heart of Simon... looking at the woman from a distance and thinking, “Isn’t that a bit much.” Jesus often calls out the Pharisees for their cold and self-righteous spirit. In Matthew 21:31, He says, “The tax collectors and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you.” *Ouch.*

But, there have also been moments in my life where my heart has been broken open and spilled out for the Lord, like this woman’s...where I KNEW it was MY sin that put him on the cross.

But, if we’re honest, what can happen to many of us...is that over time, and at different seasons....those affections can cool. I can become puffed up in my perceived self-righteousness...I can believe myself entitled to forgiveness...which can lead to stingy love for God and others.

How about you? Do you find your spirit often critical and filled with complaints? Are you quick to find fault in others? How easily do you show kindness and grace to strangers?

I want a heart that loves generously and eyes that see people’s potential goodness instead of their past mistakes. So, how can we keep our heart tender? Toward God and toward those around us?

I believe this passage gives us the two-part solution: (1) Knowing and remembering the depth of our sin (our need for Jesus) and (2) remembering the precious cost of our salvation.

Confession becomes a vital means of grace for just this task of remembering our need. It’s not natural to look at our sin deeply. Martin Luther is often quoted for saying that, “Religion (meaning ‘self-justification’ is the default mode of the human heart.” Since the first sin in the garden, our instinct has been to hide and deny our sinfulness. But, it’s the Gospel that both invites and enables us to look bravely at our great NEED of Him. I can bring to Him the ways I’ve failed to love my children well, the impatient outbursts and the indulgences of my selfish nature. Perhaps in the evening, as I prepare for bed and reflect on the day. Or I can come to him following a moment of failure, and I can receive intimacy and restoration, not isolation and shame.

“Confession is a welcome out of the burden of hiding and denying into the freedom of God’s forgiving and cleansing grace.”

It's not something that gets me back in good standing with God...no, your and my sins are fully forgiven. But, it's a gift of grace that keeps our hearts humble and our love for God passionate.

Paul David Tripp writes, "Because of [Jesus], you don't need to be afraid of your unrighteousness; no, it is your delusions of righteousness that are the grave danger."

If you and I don't routinely see the depth of our sin, our hearts won't be amazed and undone by that grace of God.

But, we also need to know and remember the cost that was paid. Those of you who are believers in Jesus, can you remember a time when your heart was SWEETLY BROKEN by the grace of God? Where you saw and REALLY understood what Jesus had done, and not just done for the whole world, but done for YOU?

I grew up in the Lutheran church and I remember several Good Friday services, where we left in darkness and silence, feeling just a bit of the weight of what Jesus went through on our behalf. I remember the sobering description of crucifixion in Lee Strobel's The Case for Christ. I have mentioned before watching the Passion of the Christ in college and how impactful that was.

How many here have been watching episodes of The Chosen? Hasn't it been wonderful? Obviously it's only an attempt to capture the essence of the disciples and Jesus. But if you've found yourself connecting personally with it, you've also likely considered how difficult that final season or two will be. And of course, that's not because of the TV show or the actors, its because of the beauty of the Jesus Himself. They present just a small reflection of our real and risen Savior.

So, how is your heart this morning? I want to invite you to "see this woman"...to consider your own desperate need for Jesus, and the beauty of our Savior...to bring Him your life and your heart as an offering. If you're ready for more tenderness and a BIG love, then join me in prayer:

Loving Heavenly Father, would you gently search us and know our hearts. When you saved us, you took our heart of stone and gave us a heart of flesh. Would you renew and soften that heart in us today? Forgive us for pride, for any unlovely thoughts and attitudes that are yet to be yielded to Your likeness. Remind us of your precious son, who was broken and spilled out for our sins. And empower us with the love and grace of Your Holy Spirit. We pray in Jesus name, Amen.