

## The Woman Who Was a Sinner<sup>1</sup>

We meet today a person who had probably long ago decided that she was forever "on the outs" with God, with religion, and certainly with respectable people. All we're told is that she was a sinner. The text gives us no name. It only gives us the judgment of her life and character—sinner. Our imagination fills in the details. Difficult impoverished childhood. Marriage to the wrong person. Reliance on her attractiveness to get by.

The tragedy is that this woman's descent into the status as a sinner is one way. The Judaism of her day offered a rugged formula to get beyond one's sins. You had to be sorry at heart, you had to fess up to everything and tell a religious leader exactly what you've done. And you had to compensate everyone whom you've wronged.

All that may work for the otherwise upright citizen who has a slip-up. But this woman who we know as "sinner" is so entangled in her moral compromises, her acts of desperation, her friendship with the street crowd. She couldn't even remember her sins from yesterday, much less compensate for a lifetime of wrongdoing. Indeed, for women whose sins were similar to those

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of this woman, the rabbis had no remedy. They simply couldn't overcome their sin dilemma.

I wonder how many people in our world or even among us today feel like this woman. We just live with a resigned sense that we are who we are. We never set out to hurt anyone. We've never much done the church thing or the religion thing. And we go through life thinking that we're living life as best as we can, and we'll just have to see where all that leads.

If you've ever felt that way, you'll be interested in what happened to this woman. By the end of this scene in the Pharisee's house, I get the feeling that the woman has drawn near to God in a profound and healing way. Something amazing transpires.

Let's take a look at what happens. We begin with the Pharisee inviting Jesus to a meal. What is striking is the Pharisee's rudeness toward Jesus. We understand this. We have someone over to our homes. We say, "Please come in. We're glad you're here. May I take your coat? Can I get you something to eat or drink? And so on.

The Pharisee host does none of the expected hospitality courtesies. No hand-washing, no anointing olive oil, and so on. We wonder that Jesus didn't leave immediately.

The woman appears. Clearly, she has some knowledge of Jesus. Maybe she has heard his teaching about the grace and forgiveness and she has come to give the one thing of value that she has to give—an alabaster jar of fine perfume.

Now, the woman observes the rude reception that Jesus is given and is personally disturbed by what is happening. What she decides is that she personally will make up for the host's rude negligence, by attempting to wash and anoint Jesus herself. Of course, she has not water. And even to ask for a basin of water would probably get her thrown out by the servants. What she uses is her tears to wet Jesus' feet. Then she unfurls her hair to wipe Jesus' feet because she has no towel.

This personal devotion of kissing feet is striking even to us. At the close of the Civil War in 1865, Abraham Lincoln took a visit to the southern capital, of Richmond, Virginia. On arrival, a new freed slave rushed to the president, fell on his knees and began to kiss Lincoln's feet. Embarrassed, Lincoln replied, "That's not right. You must kneel to God only, and thank him for liberty."

There's more. The woman's action of exposing her hair was especially shocking in that Middle Eastern environment. Even today, Middle Eastern women cover their hair in public.

Exposing a woman's hair, even today in the Middle East, is an intimate act reserved for one's husband.

So as this unnamed woman lets down her hair and as she touches Jesus, she is making some kind of pledge or commitment to Jesus. She is engaging in an intimacy that we sense but don't fully understand. Of course, the Pharisee and any others present are horrified.

We might wonder why Jesus doesn't say:

That's enough. If you are grateful to God, go to the Temple and offer a thanksgiving sacrifice. In the court of women you can draw as close to the presence of God in the holy of holies as our faith permits.

But that's not what happens. Jesus accepts her acts— inappropriate though they are. He doesn't send her away. He chooses to suffer the scorn of onlookers and any damage to his own reputation by receiving the devotion of this woman.

What's happening here? We're looking at the miracle of a broken and morally defunct person being received and restored. The part of this that intrigues me is that Jesus accepts her devotion just as it comes. She's doing what comes naturally to her and Jesus will not turn her away.

Did you ever stop to think that Jesus receives and relates with every person individually and unlike any other? In the gospels, Jesus receives some, scolds some, puts some to work,

and teaches some, helps some. Notice that Jesus us just as gracious to the Pharisee. The rude host also has not been rejected. Jesus treats him differently from the woman.

Jesus does the same with you and me. If you or I would but come to him, he would receive us and however we wish to worship him. How does the great old revival hymn go?

Just as I am without one plea  
But that thy blood was shed for me  
And that thou biddest me come to me  
O Lamb of God I come, I come.

Just as I am thou wilt receive  
Wilt welcome, pardon, cleanse, relieve.  
Because thy promise, I believe  
O Lamb of God, I come, I come.

There's a great truth enshrined in this story. No matter who you are; no matter your church background; no matter the mistakes you've made in your life, Jesus Christ stands ready to receive you, your prayers, your devotion, your service. You don't need to look like any other Christian or believer. Jesus stands ready to receive you just as you are and have a saving relationship with you that is like no other. It's just between you and him, just as the relationship between this woman and Jesus was absolutely one-of-a-kind.

If you came here today feeling much an outsider who hangs out or visits in church with a bunch of Christians; if you hold

grave doubts over whether God loves you and whether you have the prospect of living forever with him; if you think of two or three things you've done that you've decide will always mar your life, consider the woman who was a sinner. She found her way to him. She was grateful to him and she tried to show it. And Jesus let her come and did not turn her away. He's prepared to do the same with you and me.

This is our prayer: "Lord, I come to you deserving no good thing from you. I only trust your love which can make me whole and well. Receive me into your presence and never let me go.