

“Fierce Love”

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Texts: Luke 7: 36-50 and Matthew 25: 35-40

The three gospels where this story appears each tell it a little differently, but on fact remains the same: this woman was not to have been in the room, let alone doing what she did. Helen Bruch Pearson in her book, *Do What You Have the Power to Do: Studies of Six New Testament Women* writes, “...this woman appeared out of nowhere. She burst in—uninvited and unwanted! What a brash and dangerous thing for a woman to do. She was breaking the Jewish custom that women were not allowed to enter the dining room when men were present. And if this were not enough to anger any righteous man among them, the woman did another completely unexpected thing. In front of the astounded and indignant male guests, she broke the alabaster jar she carried and...” in Luke’s Gospel, she washes Jesus’ feet with it and wipes them clean with her hair. It was outrageous! It was scandalous! We haven’t even talked yet about where the expensive ointment might have come from! One can say that many things were happening all at once, but it boils down to the fact that this woman had fierce love for Jesus. Fierce love makes us do things that others might think inappropriate or downright wrong. Yet, here is Jesus, praising her actions and scolding his host, Simon.

Speaking of Simon, we need to talk about who he was a bit. Simon was a Pharisee, or what the *First Nations Version* of the New Testament calls, “the Separated Ones.” Take that as you will. Clearly, he was a devout, religious man who “lives his life according to

God's laws, invites Jesus into his home. Customarily, such a host would greet a guest with acts of hospitality: the washing of feet soiled by dusty roadways; an anointing of oil for respite from the heat of the day; a kiss of welcome (Rev. Dr. Brian Blount, *Commentary on Luke 7:36-50; Matthew 25: 35-40*)." I'm sure Jesus was surprised that these simple acts of kindness and hospitality were not bestowed upon him. Note that he didn't say a word about it until after the woman burst into the room.

They are at the table, which in Jesus' day would likely have been with the men sitting on the floor almost lounging while they ate their meal. The gospel isn't clear that the meal had started, but it may have. Nevertheless, interruption should not have occurred. But there she is! "A solitary figure, the woman was as bold and unashamed as she was tender and compassionate (Pearson, p46)." As Rev. Dr. Brian Blount shares, "We see the woman's actions as a bold act of love: she seeks Jesus out, enters where she isn't allowed, and bathes Jesus' feet with expensive perfume. She won't let her love be limited, no matter what others may think of her." Truly, that was what was at play. The authors of our series suggest that a sub-theme for this week should be the Greatest Commandment, as it is the foundation for all of Jesus' teaching. You know the greatest commandment, "You should love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind and soul, and love your neighbor as yourself." Whether she was loving God or loving her neighbor you could debate, but either way, she was exercising great love. I'd even call it fierce!

The whole audience was astounded—you could easily suggest that they were angry. This was not a pleasant surprise in their mind. How dare she! I have no doubt that every one of those in the room that day loved God. They practiced the first part of the commandment. But love of neighbor...not so much! Whether it is the failure to anoint and welcome Jesus as a guest in the first place, or their treatment of the woman, I think it's quite clear that love of neighbor was clearly lacking. Not much has changed as today many people praise God loudly and with great love but struggle mightily with the love of neighbor. I think it is a big problem among communities of faith since the beginning of their existence. Praise God! What is that person doing here? Sometimes all in the same breath. Loving God and loving neighbor are intrinsically connected. Can we genuinely love God if we do not love our neighbor?

What brings out fierce love in you? What would be important enough for you to be willing to sacrifice in service to someone else? How will you weather the storm of well-meaning people who criticize what you do and how you do it? This story raises a lot of questions about what lengths we will go to in order to love God and to love someone else. What the woman did wasn't easy, and you have to expect that she thought much worse would happen to her when those in the room decided to punish her for her actions. Simon began with judgment and probably utter horror. Then Jesus spoke.

In a rather surprising turn, Jesus praises the woman, characterizing her actions as signs of hospitality and "great love." Then he turns to speak to Simon and speaks to him in economic terms (perhaps because he is an expert in matters of the law), Jesus reveals a story about forgiveness, grace, and love (Blount). "He gently indicates that Simon has

neglected to show hospitality; the woman, whom Simon and the others have judged, has conversely shown “great love. Therefore, can this story show us what it means to love God with our whole heart, soul, and mind? Might it also expose our own tendencies to judge others and to neglect hospitality? (Blount)”

A couple of weeks ago, Rokko shared with you a more in-depth conversation about Matthew 25, so I won't go into all of it here. Suffice it to say that when we care for the hungry, the stranger, the imprisoned, we show “great love” for God and neighbor all at once.

The parable Jesus tells is really quite self-explanatory. It is about the extravagance and ferocity of God's love.

The whole story boils down to this: Jesus tells the woman to go in peace. There's no judgment and Simon and his friends have been gently reminded of their role as God's people. What the story fails to tell us, though, is how can this woman go in peace, given all else she is dealing with? The truth is that she will need help. She likely lived on the streets and often finds herself among those who struggle just like her. “Forgiven, she now needs the welcome she has shown Jesus to be extended to her by a community of Jesus people—people who recognize that they, too, have been graced by the extravagance of God's healing love. This is a lot harder to do than it looks like. Systems and structures keep this woman in a difficult place. We don't know for sure how she earns her money, but many have hinted that it might not be earned in the godliest of ways. Jesus forgave her. She escaped Simon's house without punishment. Now what?

The word Jesus used to forgive the woman was *aphesis* which is the same word for “released” used in Luke 4: 18-20 when Jesus announces his mission to “proclaim release to the captives.” We believe in release of the captives. We have been reminded that it is our role to assist in that release. But it is a tall order. We won’t get it right all of the time. We too will need forgiveness when we are more like Simon than Jesus.

Love God...love one another. Fiercely.

In the many blessed names of God. Amen.