

LAKEWOOD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
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FORGIVENESS 101
Luke 7:36-50

It is a wonderful story. At least, it is to me. Others might not like it so well. It is certainly *astounding*.

Put it in the context of a dinner party at your own home or even over in our Fellowship Hall. By this time in Jesus' ministry, he had garnered quite a bit of public notice. All sorts of people had been attracted to him – *rich, poor, educated, illiterate*, from the *highly respectable* to the *lowly riffraff*. To have this now famous Rabbi come to dinner was *very special* and *EVERYONE* would have been *excited* ... and possibly a bit nervous at the same time – after all this teacher had had some *not too complimentary things to say* about the religious folks who were his hosts at the moment.

Suddenly, an uninvited guest appears ... a woman described in the text as one "*who was a sinner*" [and it doesn't take too much imagination to figure what kind of sinning her life entailed]. She comes over to Jesus, begins to pour expensive perfume on Jesus' feet, *weeping* as she does so and then *wipes* his feet with her *hair*. The other guests just stared, wide-eyed and open-mouthed.

If you think this would be *uncomfortable* in our day, it would have been almost *UNIMAGINABLE* back then. Women did *not intrude* into the company of men who were sitting at a table for dinner; in fact, even *wives* were often not included. As to her very public show of affection, it would have been excessive in the extreme – letting down her long hair in public [*not done*], wiping his feet with it and kissing them [*please – this is getting just way too intimate*]. On top of all *that*, think about what this does to Jesus' stature as a holy man and rabbi to be *known* by this lady of ill repute?

Jesus *could* have brushed her off. And the story makes it plain that this is *precisely* what his dinner companions and host *expected*. But, nooooo. Instead, Jesus *jumps* to her defense with a little story.

"Simon, I have something to say to you." [Simon was the Pharisee who was Jesus' host.] "Teacher," he replied, "speak."

"A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. [a denarius was about a day's wage] When they could not pay, he cancelled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?"

Simon replies, "I suppose the one for whom he cancelled the greater debt."

You *SUPPOSE*, Simon? You *SUPPOSE*?

And then Jesus tells his host the reason for this woman's remarkable behavior. She had been *forgiven* ... *A LOT!* The story doesn't tell us, but clearly this was *NOT* the first time she and Jesus had met. She obviously had *heard* his word of *forgiveness* at some previous encounter and had come to experience the *remarkable sense of liberation* that came with it ... thus, the outpouring of affection [not to mention the expensive perfume].

But you see, there is something *MORE* that was necessary. For this woman's life to *really change*, the rest of the town had to *KNOW* she had been forgiven as well.

She would not be truly whole again until she was no longer a social leper. Thus, the meeting at the party.

The woman may not have been invited by Simon, but I'd be willing to bet that she *HAD BEEN* invited by Jesus.

The scene Simon and his friends witnessed that day was Jesus' clever way of beginning that process of *restoring her to the community*. That's why the story ends with Jesus telling the woman, "*Your faith has SAVED you.*" Not pie-in-the-sky bye-and-bye saved, but wholeness, healing, shalom in the here-and-now saved.



Now, here's what I want you to do ... put yourself in the story. Who are *YOU*? *Jesus*? *The woman*? *Simon* and his *friends*? For myself, I know my tendency would be to be Simon. At times I can be terribly judgmental and completely self-righteous without much prompting at all. But a story like this reminds me that this is *NOT* what *I* or the *CHURCH I SERVE* should be about.

Contrary to what way too many people think, the church is *NOT* in the morality business. *SOCIETY* handles that role just fine, thank you. *SOCIETY* pays legislatures to catalog that morality by writing the appropriate rules and regulations, then, pays police to enforce that code.

The church is not in the morality business, the church is in the forgiveness business. Hear that again: the church is not in the morality business, the church is in the forgiveness business. ONE MORE TIME: the church is *NOT* in the MORALITY business, the church is in the FORGIVENESS business.

If you take nothing away from here this morning but *THAT*, it will be sufficient because, quite frankly, when the church *FORGETS IT*, *we get into trouble*.

And that is precisely why churches continue to have these *INTERNAL* [and seemingly *E-TERNAL*] squabbles about social issues – *human sexuality, abortion, gay rights, and so on and so on and so on and so on and so on.*



Every Sunday when I walk out into the isle to welcome our guests and visitors, I tell them two things. I say: "*It is our hope that you experience two things today ... first, that you experience God here in our midst, for God is here. And secondly, that you experience the love of this family of God, for we are a loving family of God.*"

The church is not in the morality business, the church is in the forgiveness business ... the business of *LOVING* people. When we are tempted to forget *THAT*, we would do *well* to *REMEMBER* a certain party at the home of Simon the Pharisee.



As you should know by now, I just love Tony Campolo and his stories.

Several years ago Tony wrote a book entitled *The Kingdom of God Is a Party*. In it he tells of flying to Hawaii to speak at a conference. He describes checking into his hotel and trying to get some sleep. Unfortunately, his internal clock wakes him at 3:00 AM. The night is *dark*, the streets are *silent*, the world is *asleep*, but Tony is *wide awake* and his stomach is growling.

He gets up and prowls the streets looking for a place to get some bacon and eggs for an early breakfast. Everything is closed except for a grungy dive in an alley. He goes in and sits down at the counter. The *fat guy* behind the counter comes over and asks, "What d'ya want?"

Well, Tony isn't so hungry anymore so eyeing some donuts under a plastic cover he says, "I'll have a donut and black coffee."

As he sits there munching on his donut and sipping his coffee at 3:30, in walk eight or nine *provocative, loud* "ladies of the night" just finished with their evening's work. They plop down at the counter and Tony finds himself *uncomfortably* surrounded by this group of *smoking, swearing hookers*. He gulps his coffee, planning to make a quick getaway. Then the woman next to him says to her friend, "You know what? Tomorrow's my birthday. I'm gonna be 39."

To which her friend nastily replies, "So what d'ya want from me? A birthday party? Huh? You want me to get a cake, and sing happy birthday to you?"

The first woman says, "Aw, come on, why do you have to be so *mean*? Why do you have to put me down? I'm just sayin' it's my birthday. I don't want anything from you. I mean, *WHY* should I have a birthday party? I've *NEVER* had a birthday party in my whole life. *Why should I have one now?*"

Well, when Tony heard that, he said he made a decision. He sat and waited until the women left, and then he asked the *fat guy at the counter*, "Do they come in here every night?"

"Yeah," he answered.

"The one right next to me," Tony asked, "she comes in every night?"

"Yeah," the fat guy said, "that's Agnes. Yeah, she's here every night. She's been comin' here for years. Why d'ya want to know?"

"Because she just said that tomorrow is her birthday. What do you think? Do you think we could maybe throw a little birthday party for her right here in the diner?"

A *cute* kind of smile crept over the fat man's chubby cheeks. "That's great," he says, "yeah, that's great. I like it." He turns to the kitchen and shouts to his wife, "Hey, Thelma, come on out here. This guy's got a great idea. Tomorrow is Agnes' birthday and he wants to throw a party for her right here."

His wife comes out. "That's terrific," she says. "You know, Agnes is really nice. She's always trying to *help other people* and nobody does anything nice for her."

So they make their plans. Tony says he'll be back at 2:30 the next morning with some decorations and the fat guy, whose name turns out to be Harry, says he'll bake a cake.

At 2:30 the next morning, Tony is back. He has crepe paper and other decorations and a sign made of big pieces of cardboard that says, "Happy Birthday, Agnes!" They decorate the place from one end to the other and get it looking great. Harry had gotten the word out on the streets about the party and by 3:15 it seemed that every prostitute in Honolulu was in the place. There were hookers wall to wall.

At 3:30 on the dot, the door swings open and in walks Agnes and her friend. Tony has everybody ready. They all shout and scream "*Happy Birthday, Agnes!*" Agnes is absolutely flabbergasted. She's stunned, her mouth falls open, her knees started to buckle, and she almost falls over.

And when the birthday cake with all the candles is carried out, *that's when she TOTALLY loses it*. Now she's sobbing and crying. Harry, who's not used to seeing a prostitute cry, gruffly mumbles, "Blow out the candles, Agnes. Cut the cake."

So she pulls herself together and blows them out. Everyone cheers and yells, "*Cut the cake, Agnes, cut the cake!*"

But Agnes looks down at the cake and, without taking her eyes off it, slowly and softly says, "Look, Harry, is it all right with you if ... I mean, if I don't ... I mean, what I want to ask, is it OK if I keep the cake a little while? Is it all right if we don't eat it right away?"

Harry doesn't know what to say so he shrugs and says, "Sure, if that's what you want to do. Keep the cake. Take it home if you want."

"Oh, could I?" she asks. Looking at Tony she says, "I live just down the street a couple of doors; I want to take the cake home, is that okay? I'll be right back, honest. My daughter has never seen a birthday cake before either. I want to show her."

She gets off her stool, picks up the cake, and carries it high in front of her like it was the Holy Grail. *Everybody* watches in *stunned silence* ... and when the door closes behind her, *nobody seems to know what to do*. They look at each other. Somebody says, "I didn't even know she had a daughter." They all look at Tony as if to say, "What do we do now?"

So Tony gets up on a chair and says, "What do you say we pray together?" And there they are in a *hole-in-the-wall greasy spoon, half the prostitutes in Honolulu*, at 3:30 AM, listening to Tony Campolo as he prays for Agnes. Tony recalls, "I prayed that her life would be *changed*, and that God would be *good* to her and her *daughter*."

When he's finished, Harry leans over, and with a *trace of hostility in his voice*, he says, "Hey, you never told me you was a preacher. What *KIND* of *CHURCH* do you belong to anyway?"

In one of those rare moments when just the right words came, Tony answers him quietly, "*I belong to a church that throws birthday parties for prostitutes at 3:30 in the morning.*"

Harry thinks for a moment, and then says, "No you don't. There ain't no church like that. If there was, I'd join it. *YEP, I'D JOIN A CHURCH LIKE THAT.*"

Amen and Amen!