

The Woman with the Alabaster Box

Luke 7:36-40, 44-48

Articles in the periodicals to expand this story:

“A Story of Gratitude,” Rev. Irving C. Tomlinson, CSJ, May 1905.

“We have but scanty records of Mary Magdalene until the time of the crucifixion. For two years she was privileged to be of the company which went with the Master from city to city, preaching the glad tidings of the kingdom of God and healing the sick. We learn in the eighth chapter of Luke that she, with the twelve disciples and with many others ‘ministered unto him of their substance.’

“Matthew tells us in the twenty-seventh chapter of his Gospel, that "many women were there beholding afar off, which followed Jesus from Galilee, ministering unto him: among which was Mary Magdalene." The faithful Mary lingered as near the cross as the Roman soldiery would permit. No hatred was so deep, no malice so bitter as to separate her from her beloved Master. Let it be recorded that in the trial and crucifixion hours there was one who never wavered in her steadfast adherence to her revered Teacher. (“A Story of Gratitude,” Rev. Irving C. Tomlinson, CSJ, May 1905.)

Luke 7:36

36 And one of the Pharisees desired him that he would eat with him. And he went into the Pharisee's house, and sat down to meat.

“*One of the Pharisees*. His name was Simon. Nothing more is known of him. It is not improbable, however, from what follows, (vers. 40-47) that he had been healed by the Savior of some afflictive disease, and made this feast to show his gratitude.

“*Sat down to meat*. The original word here means only that he placed himself or reclined, at the table. The notion of *sitting* at meals is taken from modern customs and was not practiced by the Jews” (Barnes 205).

37 And, behold, a woman in the city, which was a sinner, when she knew that Jesus sat at meat in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster box of ointment,

“The Pharisee is here unnamed, but in verse 40, 43, 44 he is called Simon. The Pharisee has heard about Jesus, just as has the sinful woman. Verse 39 will reveal that he has suspected Jesus to be a prophet, hence

his invitation probably stemmed from a desire to honor an important person” (*AB Luke i-ix.692*).

“Since he accepted an invitation from a Pharisee, Jesus cannot be accused of spurning the Pharisees socially. The woman took advantage of the social customs that permitted needy people to visit such a banquet to receive some of the leftovers. She came specifically to see Jesus, bringing a jar or little bottle of perfume. Since Jesus was reclining at the table according to custom, she prepared to pour the perfume on his feet, a humble act. A flow of tears preceded the outpouring of the perfume; so she wiped his feet lovingly with her hair and, perhaps impulsively, kissed them before using the perfume” (*EBC 8.903*).

“*hamartolos* is a ‘sinner’; who has lived a sinful life. It is the word Luke often uses to identify a person who has a reputation for gross immorality. The woman’s unbound hair might indicate that she was a prostitute” (*EBC 8.904*).

“**Ointment.** This word does not convey quite the proper meaning. This was a perfume: it was used only to give a pleasant odor and was liquid” (Barnes 173).

Mark 14:3 mentions that it is “spikenard.”

“The nard, from which this perfume was made is a plant of the East Indies, with a small slender stalk, and a heavy, thick root. The best perfume is obtained from the root, though the stalk and fruit are used for that purpose” (Barnes 173).

Alabaster in Greek is *alabastron*. Certain properties of this mineral made it ideal for carving into vases and perfume bottles. The Greek word also refers to “a box made of alabaster in which unguents are preserved. The ancients considered alabaster to be the best material in which to preserve their ointments. Breaking the box, probably means breaking the seal of the box” (Thayer 24).

“**An alabaster box.** We have evidence that perfumed oils—notably oil of roses, and of the iris plant, but chiefly the mixture known in antiquity as *foliatum*—were largely manufactured and used in Palestine. A flask with this perfume was worn by women round the neck” (Dummelow 749).

38 And stood at his feet behind him weeping, and began to wash his feet with tears, and did wipe them with the hairs of her head, and kissed his feet, and anointed them with the ointment.

“In the Savior's company "Mary stood." How unlike her thought of her Redeemer was that of Simon. The Pharisee rested in a satisfied sense of his own worth. For him to receive Jesus was an act of condescension, the bestowal

of a favor. Mary had no sense of self.

“She took her place at his feet. It was not for her to be seated at his right hand. Yet there was something within which told her that she would be welcome at the feet of Jesus. Of another Mary who sat at his feet, the Master said, "Mary hath chosen that good part." She was not coveting a position of dignity and honor. She humbly sought the privilege of lowly service. He who takes his place at the feet of the Master is destined for higher tasks. Heaven's call comes not to the worldly great, but to those who rejoice to stand in the presence of God's anointed. When she made her offering she came behind him. The self-righteous would have gone before. The self-satisfied would have taken their places beside him.

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“They reclined, at their meals, on their left side; and their feet, therefore, were extended from the table, so that persons could easily approach them. The Jews wore sandals. These were taken off when they entered a house. It was an act of hospitality and kindness to wash the feet of a guest. She, therefore, began to show her love for him, and at the same time her humility and penitence, by pouring forth a flood of tears, and washing his feet in the manner of a servant. The kiss was an emblem of love and affection. In this manner she testified her love for the Lord Jesus—and at the same time her humility, and sense of sin, by kissing his feet. There could be few expressions of penitence more deep and tender than were these. A sense of all her sins rushed over her mind; her heart burst at the remembrance of them, and at the presence of the pure Redeemer; with deep sorrow she humbled herself, and sought forgiveness. She showed her love for him by a kiss of affection; her humility, by bathing his feet; her veneration, by anointing his feet” (Barnes 205).

“**Hairs.** To appreciate this act we must remember that it was one of the greatest humiliations for a woman to be seen with her hair disheveled” (Dummelow 749).

39 Now when the Pharisee which had bidden him saw it, he spake within himself, saying, This man, if he were a prophet, would have known who and what manner of woman this is that toucheth him: for she is a sinner.

“In this masterly narrative, Luke now directs attention to the Pharisee. He mulls over the matter and reaches three conclusions: 1) if Jesus were a prophet, he would know what kind of woman was anointing his feet: 2) if he knew what kind of a woman she was, he would not let her do it; and 3) since he does let her anoint his feet, he is no prophet and should not be acknowledged as such. But Jesus does let her

expend the perfume on him and does not shun her. He shows that he does have unique insight into the human heart, for he knows what the Pharisee is thinking” (*EBC* 8.903).

“The Pharisees considered it improper to hold communion with those who were notorious sinners. They judged our Savior by their own rules, and supposed he would act in the same way; and Simon therefore concluded that he did not know her character, and could not be a prophet” (Barnes 205).

“Jesus knew who the woman was; the Pharisee knew—or thought he did—of what sort she was. The Pharisee had people arranged in classes; this woman was a sinner. He had rules governing his behavior toward the various classes or sorts. Having identified the class to which the woman belonged, he knew how she should be treated. But Jesus did not classify people; he did not concern himself much with what sort they were; he was always interested in who they were” (*IB* 8.143).

40 And Jesus answering said unto him, Simon, I have somewhat to say unto thee. And he saith, Master, say on.
44 And he turned to the woman, and said unto Simon, Seest thou this woman? I entered into thine house, thou gavest me no water for my feet: but she hath washed my feet with tears, and wiped them with the hairs of her head.

“*Seest thou this woman?* You see what this woman has done to me, compared with what you have done. She has shown to me expressions of regard, which you, in your own house, have not shown. I came at your invitation, where I might expect all the usual rites of hospitality....

“Among eastern people it was customary, before eating, to wash the feet; and to do this or to bring water for it was one of the rites of hospitality. The reasons for this were, that they wore sandals which covered only the bottom of the feet, and that when they ate they reclined on couches or sofas. It became therefore necessary that the feet should be often washed” (Barnes 205).

“Simon had treated Jesus as a casual guest—possibly as a social inferior. In contrast the woman had lavished evidences of her love upon him” (*IB* 8.144).

“Again the woman is the focal point of the narrative. Surprisingly, Jesus first contrasts her acts of devotion with a lack of special attention on Simon’s part as host. The main point is reached swiftly. Jesus can declare that her sins (which he does not hesitate to say were ‘many’) have been forgiven. He can affirm this because her act of love shows her realization of forgiveness. Her love is not the basis of forgiveness; her faith is. As in the event itself, the forgiveness was unearned; and it is this fact that elicits her love” (*EBC* 8.903).

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“Thou gavest me no water for my feet; Among eastern people it was customary, before eating, to wash the feet; and to do this, or to bring water for it was one of the rites of hospitality. The reasons for this were, that they wore sandals which covered only the bottom of the feet, and that when they ate they reclined on couches or sofas. It became therefore necessary that the feet should be often washed” (Barnes 205).

45 Thou gavest me no kiss: but this woman since the time I came in hath not ceased to kiss my feet.

“*No kiss.* The kiss was a token of affection or a very common mode of salutation, and Simon had even neglected this mark of welcoming him to his house. It was often used among men as a sign of salutation” (Barnes 205).

“Hath not ceased to kiss my feet. How striking the difference between the conduct of Simon and this woman! Simon, with all the richness of a splendid preparation, had omitted the common marks of regard and affection. She, in humility, had bowed at his feet—had watered them with tears—and had not ceased to kiss them. The most splendid entertainments do not always express the most welcome. There may be much insincerity—much seeking of popularity, or some other motive—but no such motive could have operated in inducing a broken-hearted sinner to wash the Saviour’s feet with tears” (Barnes 206).

“She "kissed his feet." The kiss which the subject imprints upon the hand of his sovereign is the visible sign of his unswerving loyalty. Simon gave no kiss. He acknowledged no superior worth. He confessed to no feeling of consideration due his invited guest. He felt not his power. He loved but little. Said Jesus, "This woman since the time I came in hath not ceased to kiss my feet." (“A Story of Gratitude,” Rev. Irving C. Tomlinson, CSJ, May 1905.

46 My head with oil thou didst not anoint: but this woman hath anointed my feet with ointment.

“*With ointment.* This ointment was a mixture of various aromatics, and was therefore far more costly and precious than the oil commonly used for anointing the head. Her conduct, compared with that of Simon, was therefore more striking. He did not give even the common oil for his head, used on such occasions. She had applied to his feet a far more precious and valuable unguent. He, therefore, showed comparatively little love. She showed much” (Barnes 206).

“It is related that she washed his feet with her tears and wiped them with the hairs of her head. The offices which the selfish Simon had neglected, it was her privilege to perform. In Palestine, where the sandal was the only covering of the feet, the first mark of hospitality to the guest was to provide water with which the feet could be washed. She had been cleansed of her impurity. She had been lifted from materiality to spirituality. The tears of joy with which she washed his feet were a symbol of the purity to which her life was dedicated.

“To anoint the head of the guest with rare perfume was a gracious courtesy. It carried with it the acknowledgment of his exalted place. Upon the head of kings and priests when ordained to high office was poured the holy oil. Simon gave no ointment. To him Jesus was neither Master nor Lord; neither teacher, leader, nor friend. Simon might have anointed the Savior's head with oil, but, blind to this precious privilege, he neglected his opportunity. Mary felt her own unworthiness too much to touch the head of her loved Lord, but it was a holy privilege to perfume his feet with ointment. Mary knew it not, but in evidencing her appreciation of the Anointed One, she witnessed to her own anointing. Within her heart she had crowned the Christ-man King and Lord, and his coronation made the Christ regnant in her own life. She was no longer passion's slave, but its master. She worshiped no other God than divine Love. Her entire being
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47 Wherefore I say unto thee, Her sins, which are many, are forgiven; for she loved much: but to whom little is forgiven, the same loveth little.

“Thou canst see that she is a reformed character and that her many sins have been forgiven, because of the love she bears to me who have saved her from her sinful life. It should be carefully observed that the woman loved because she was forgiven, not forgiven because she loved” (Dummelow 749).

“Is the forgiveness the consequence of the love, or is the love the result of the forgiveness? ...It is clear that Luke finds a correlation between degrees of forgiveness and degrees of love: the woman has been forgiven much and loves much; Simon loves little and has been forgiven little” (*IB* 8.145)

“The significant difference between the woman and Simon is not that she had been a worse sinner than he—it is possible that she had not been—but that she has realized more truly and deeply the reality of her sin. ...So this woman came to herself, i.e. had faced up to the moral situation in a way Simon had not done” (*IB* 8.145).

48 And he said unto her, Thy sins are forgiven.

50 Thy faith hath saved thee; go in peace.