

March 1st, 2026

Matthew 25:35-40, Luke 7:36-50 “Love for God and Neighbor”

The first scripture Gary read this morning comes from Matthew’s Gospel. It’s one of those passages that has unsettled Christians for centuries. People hear it and immediately want to ask, “Did he *really* mean that?” In this parable, Jesus makes a startling claim: how we treat those on the margins — the hungry, the sick, the imprisoned, the stranger — is equal to how we treat him. It’s a bold and dare I say controversial teaching. And yes, it carries real weight. And I didn’t even get into the juicy part of the parable where Jesus said that failing to help people who are hungry, naked, imprisoned, and sick is a punishable offense. *That’s* a sermon for another day. Today let’s just let it be the passage that *sets the stage* for what’s going on in Luke’s gospel.

Here we find Jesus dining with a Pharisee named Simon near a fishing town called Capernaum on the northwestern shore of the Sea of Galilee. Simon is a Pharisee, which means he is meticulous about living his life according to God’s Law as interpreted by his tradition. In this setting, it is customary for a person to greet a guest like Jesus with a kiss along with other acts of hospitality like washing the feet of someone who has been traveling the dusty

roadways as Jesus had. It would be normal to offer a guest an anointing of oil to provide some relief from the heat of the day.

However, Jesus gets no such greeting. Instead, an audacious woman who is labeled a “sinner” came to Simon’s house and invaded his space. Is there any kind of scholarly consensus on what “sinner” means? Sort of. Scholars agree that Luke *doesn’t* tell us what it means, and that’s probably deliberate. Either way it doesn’t take long for Simon, a man tasked with conveying God’s love to God’s people, to distance himself from this woman *and* he implies that Jesus is acting inappropriately for *allowing* her to do this. I don’t know, maybe Simon is a little embarrassed that she offered him hospitality that he didn’t. She kisses. She washes. She anoints.

Luke tells us that Simon says to himself, “If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him.” Simon doesn’t say it out loud. He just thinks it. And maybe that’s important. Simon isn’t *trying* to be *cruel*. He’s *trying* to be *faithful*. He’s spent his life learning how to honor God, how to keep the law, how to draw careful boundaries around what is holy and what is not. But sometimes the boundaries we build to protect holiness can keep love at a distance. And Jesus answers the thought Simon never speaks out loud. He says, “Simon, I have something to say to you.” Not to shame him. Not to

humiliate him. But to widen his understanding of what God's love looks like. So Jesus tells a story — a story about debt, forgiveness, and a love that is far more extravagant than any of them expected.

Two people are in debt to a man. One debtor owes the man a little bit. The other debtor owes the man a lot. But the man did something that most people would consider ludicrous. He forgives *both* of their debts. Jesus then asks Simon which will be the most grateful. Who will express the most love? Well, that's a no-brainer. It's the man who owed the most, right? Here's where it gets tricky. Simon thinks *he* owes God much *less* than this disreputable woman because *he* has lived a holy and righteous life. But Simon doesn't understand the ferocity of this woman's love for Jesus. Remember that scripture from Matthew — “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” Now think about what that woman did for Jesus. According to Jesus, God loves her with an extravagance of grace that cancels all her sins just as surely as the creditor erased his lender's massive debt.

Then Jesus tells the woman, “Go in peace.” And that sounds beautiful — until you remember that she still has to walk back out into the same streets, past the same doorways, into the same town that only knows her as what? A sinner. Forgiveness changes her standing before

God, but will it change her standing in the community? That's where this story stops being about her and starts being about us.

If Jesus has declared her forgiven, then the only faithful response is for the community around Jesus to live as though that forgiveness is *real*. The welcome she showed him must now be shown *to her*. Because according to Jesus in that parable from Matthew 25 — to receive him is to receive the very ones others have pushed aside: the hungry, the stranger, the sick, the imprisoned. If grace cancels debt, then grace also reshapes community. Jesus' church can show Jesus' fierce love by inviting those who others are scandalized by into the warmth of their faith fellowship.

Okay, time for your reflection questions for the week -

Let's consider what this woman brings and what she offers. She carries the *weight* of her sins even though we don't know what they are. She offers her tears which may be expressions of either grief or relief. She carries expensive perfume which is strange for that time and place. This is where a lot of scholars speculate that she may have been some kind of sex worker. But it's also a sign of wealth too! We don't know. What she offers is ointment, tender care, and deep connection which Jesus identifies as acts of hospitality. What do *you* carry with

you? What can you offer to others? What can you offer to God?

Jesus announces to Simon that the woman has shown “great love.” The word Luke uses for love here isn’t sentimental love or romantic love or even “brotherly love.” It’s the kind of love that gives itself away. The kind that looks like action. It means to act wholeheartedly and unconditionally, with self-giving actions that reflect the character of God. This is the same word used in Matthew 22 when Jesus talks about what it means to love your neighbor as yourself. Why do you think Jesus describes the woman’s actions—which are interpreted very differently by Simon and his guests—in this way? How do her actions display great love, and what can we learn from her?

Now put yourself in Simon’s shoes for a moment. How would you react if a stranger walked into your home unannounced and began treating your guest in an unconventional, perhaps even socially outlandish manner? Can you see yourself in Simon’s response?

So here’s what all of this comes down to. This week, pay attention to what you carry. Not just your strengths — but your regrets, your assumptions, your quiet judgments, your unfinished stories. Bring all of it to Jesus the way that woman did — honestly, vulnerably, and without

pretense. Then pay attention to how you love. Not sentiment. Not polite tolerance. But love that costs something. Love that moves *toward* someone instead of *away* from them. Love that looks like tears, touch, generosity, courage.

And finally, pay attention to your thresholds. Your dinner tables. Your circles. Your comfort zones. Who would make you shift in your seat if they walked in? Who would you be tempted to label before you listened? Because according to Jesus in Matthew 25 *and* Luke 7, love for God and neighbor meet at the doorway. They meet in the awkward moment. They meet when grace has to become hospitality. If grace has canceled your debt — and it has — then let grace reshape your welcome.

That's something you can practice this week. Not abstractly. Not theoretically. But concretely: Carry your whole self to Christ. Offer wholehearted love. And open the door a little wider than you did before. By recalling Jesus' journey to the cross, the season of Lent reminds us of God's extravagant love. May this season inspire us to love others just as extravagantly, just as fiercely as God, through Christ, loves us.