

## **Kiss My Feet!**

Luke 7:33-50

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This is a difficult scripture passage. It is difficult for two reasons: One, this is not your run of the mill parable. The parable of the money lender is tied to the real situation in which Jesus finds himself—at a dinner party at the house of Simon the Pharisee. By contrast, take the parable of, say, the prodigal son. That parable is complete in itself, with a beginning, a middle and an ending. But in our parable of the money lender you really have to know the context in which it is told. Only then does the parable really pack a punch. This scripture passage then, is like a Tootsie roll pop—one sweet treasure inside another. Or better yet, it's like an artichoke. You have to work your way down through the leaves, to the artichoke's heart, which again, is our parable.

The other thing that makes this scripture passage difficult is that the story teller, Luke, true to form, is short on details. He drops us into the middle of a story about a dinner party, but we don't know how Jesus came to be at that party. Were he and Simon friends? Did Simon invite Jesus to his house to put him through some sort of test? And then there is the fact that Simon the Pharisee is such a terrible host, not just to Jesus, but also, presumably, to the other guests. Why is that? Luke doesn't say.

We need, I think a plan of attack for getting at this thing. I've decided that the simplest way is to first deal with the contextual issues of the parable. As we go along, we will have to fill in the blanks as best we can. By the end, we should have worked our way down to the chewy center of our tootsie roll pop, or the heart of our artichoke and then we can savor the fruit of our labor—the parable—and the meaning of the text for today.

As an entry way to dealing with the context of this parable, I want to tell you a story. Last fall, a friend of mine called to tell me that her husband, Harris Miller, was running for US Senator from Virginia. He would be running against Jim Webb for the democratic nomination. How exciting. Gee, I mean, how often does a friend call and tell you that? We chatted for awhile about this strange turn in her life—she told me about fund raisers and her travels with Harris around the state. She suspected that she would be coming to Charlottesville on occasion. We promised to make an effort to get together.

A few weeks later I was at C'ville Coffee, where I hang out sometimes to write my sermons. I looked up from my laptop computer, and there was Harris Miller walking through the door. It was one of those scenes from a movie. I jumped up, and moved across the crowded room toward Harris and Harris moved toward me and there was this big embrace in the middle of the coffee shop. Then we sat down together; he told me about his campaign.

He said he was there, that day, to talk to some potential campaign supporters.. True to his word, soon one of Harris' Charlottesville contacts arrived, so after a brief introduction, the two of them staked out a table for their meeting. I went back to my own table and laptop. I noted, as I typed away, that two other people had joined the Miller party.

I couldn't settle down. This whole thing was just too exciting. Harris Miller running for US Senator! In a little while, I got up from my table and went to the back of C'ville Coffee to talk to Than, the owner of C'ville Coffee. "Do you know that you have a very famous person sitting in your coffee shop? You see that man there, talking with those three other people?" I whispered.

"Yes."

"That man may be Virginia's next US Senator," I said. "That's Harris Miller."

To which Than whispered back, "You mean that guy there sitting next to John Grisham?"

That must have been some power meeting! And it happened right in the middle of Charlottesville, at C'ville coffee.

I mention this because it is sort of, anyway, related to our story for today. Just as Harris, Mr. Grisham and others met at table to plan a success strategy for Harris' campaign, so too, I think, Simon and some other Pharisees decide to hold a power meeting/dinner party to plan Jesus' evangelism campaign. Imagine this: Simon the Pharisee says, "I've been hearing a lot lately about that new guy, this Jesus. People say he's a prophet. Why don't I invite him over to my place for dinner. You come too. We can check him out. If he is indeed a prophet, we can put our financial and political clout behind him. After all, God's prophet shouldn't have to live from hand to mouth; and definitely God's prophet should have SOMEWHERE to lay his head."

With this in mind, Simon, the Pharisee, hastily plans, note, that is, **HASTILY PLANS**, a power meeting/dinner party to which Jesus and Simon's Pharisee colleagues are invited. That is the reason why Simon did not have servants available to wash feet, and why he did not engage in normal, some might say, extravagant social graces. The dinner has been hastily planned and the purpose is not to try to impress Jesus. Au contraire. To Simon's mind it is the other way around. If anyone should be doing the

impressing it is Jesus.. Simon's position is, "Jesus is damn lucky to have received this invitation. If he plays his cards right, we can help him get his preaching and teaching career off to a good start."

But things don't go according to Simon's plan. The problem as Simon sees it, is that. Jesus doesn't "get it;" the role he is to play at this power meeting. Jesus does not make nice with the host by kissing Simon's feet, so to speak. He does not engage in polite conversation—asking after Simon's wife and children. He does not compliment Simon on his home décor. Worse than that. Horror of horrors, Jesus brings his one woman fan club to the dinner meeting. She is a prostitute no less. She makes sexually explicit gestures to the distraction and embarrassment of the host and the other guests. Jesus makes no move to dismiss her.

You've really got to marvel at Simon's self control. He may not have been a premier host, but at least he doesn't order Jesus and his woman friend from his house. For sure he is nervously chewing on his fingernails stopping only to whisper to the servants that the food should be brought immediately. The sooner the food is served and eaten, the sooner this disaster of a dinner party will be over and done with. To think he was actually considering helping Jesus with his evangelism campaign!

Jesus is aware of the tension he has caused. Since all eyes are already on him and his lady friend, he decides to tell a parable. It has to do with money lenders, and borrowers—images these business-minded people will understand—. Through parable he makes it clear that God is with this woman, whose sins are many. In effect, he says, "This woman has received God's grace and forgiveness. For that she is extremely grateful. That is why she is kissing my feet." Jesus insinuates that Simon has also received God's grace—after all, Jesus is at the dinner meeting, isn't he? Therefore Simon should also be kissing Jesus' feet. Needless to say, Simon doesn't take Jesus up on that offer. Instead, he continues biting his nails, which are almost down to the quick. Meanwhile the other guests take to studying each OTHERS' feet while the dinner grows cold. Again, Luke does not give us the details, but we can assume the dinner party ends early.

We have worked our way down to the chewy center of our tootsie roll pop. We are now at the heart of our artichoke. There is left for us to ask, "So, what does this have to do with the price of cabbage?" At first, I thought that the meaning of this story inside a story had to do with kissing feet. Whose feet are you willing to kiss and whose feet am I willing to kiss? Do we kiss the feet of the one who brings us God's grace, or do we reserve our feet-kissing for those with the wherewithal to bring us financial or political success? That sounds good, don't you think?

Then, though, I got to thinking more about power meetings. The dinner/power meeting that Simon hosted was in no way meant to be about grace. I'm not sure that Session meetings and mission committee meetings, worship committee meetings, and Coveseville Child Development Center Board meetings and all the other meetings we have at this church qualify as **power** meetings, but they're still meetings. And then I thought to myself: how often does God's grace figure into THOSE meetings? Seems to me that like the Pharisees, we plan our meetings thinking about how we are going to do thus and so, and we worry a lot about how things are ever going to get done; but we don't consider what God's grace has in store for us. If we did, we might spend more time praying and praising God and less time worrying.

For example, when I first came to this church, I attended more than one meeting in which members fretted about Cove's future: "This church can't grow. We are in the middle of a very small town and most of the townspeople are Baptist. Look at our history. We've never had many members. Why at one time, we only had three or four people in our congregation." In those meetings we hadn't figured on God's grace.

Or take last year's Child Development Center Board meeting, during which we decided to raise enough money to support eight children with scholarships. We got out a calculator and we ran some numbers and we decided that we needed to raise \$28,500. We who were at that meeting looked at each other, eyes wide and we said, "We can't raise that." But, we hadn't figured on God's grace.

Not too long ago, the Session discussed outside uplighting for the church. We weren't sure we could raise enough money; but the biggest obstacle, as we saw it, was the neighbors. Might they not object? We worried especially about Sadie and Hugh, the couple who lives just across the creek. They are an elderly couple. Change is difficult for older people, sometimes. Sadie and Hugh are not part of this congregation, either. There was every reason to believe that they might not take kindly to our "capital improvements." We tried to get Sadie and Hugh involved in the planning process. We invited them to a trial run of the uplighting, but they didn't come. I ran into Sadie and Hugh last week. I feared the worst, but I with my heart in my throat, I had to ask, "So, what do you think of Cove's uplighting?"

Hugh said, Well, I tell you. We stand at our picture window in the evenings and wait for those lights to come on. The church is so beautiful at night." We hadn't figured on God's grace.

Amen

