

(Luke 7:36-8:3 NRSV)

³⁶ One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and took his place at the table. ³⁷ And a woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. ³⁸ She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment.

³⁹ Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him--that she is a sinner." ⁴⁰ Jesus spoke up and said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." "Teacher," he replied, "Speak."

⁴¹ "A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. ⁴² When they could not pay, he canceled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?" ⁴³ Simon answered, "I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt." And Jesus said to him, "You have judged rightly."

⁴⁴ Then turning toward the woman, he said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. ⁴⁵ You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. ⁴⁶ You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. ⁴⁷ Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little."

⁴⁸ Then he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." ⁴⁹ But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?" ⁵⁰ And he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

⁸¹ Soon afterwards he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, ² as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, ³ and Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their resources.

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Too Simple?

A sermon preached at North-Prospect United Church of Christ, Cambridge, Massachusetts

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Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Text: Luke 7:36-8:3

For us the question of Jesus is settled. That may come as something of a surprise to many of you. If you've followed the recent news about trying to figure out just who the historical Jesus was, and what he was like, you probably know that we know very little about him. If you've heard various groups of Christians describe their particular ideas about what Jesus means, it may seem there are a thousand versions of him. Or, if you've simply struggled in your own life to understand what role Jesus plays in your scheme of things, it may seem to you that the question of Jesus is anything but settled. But it is.

The question of Jesus is settled at least to this extent. We know the stories. We know the ending. And, so, we know his importance and his authority. For the many ways in which the question of Jesus may remain unsettled for us, his authority, his legitimacy to speak on religious issues is assumed, a given.

But when the story in this morning's scripture happened, he had no such standing. He was as yet unproven. Like a hot prospect in sports, he may have demonstrated potential, but he was as yet unproven, a rookie.

It was his potential, no doubt, that got him an invitation to Simon the Pharisee's house for dinner. It was his unproven-ness that got him watched like a hawk. They wanted to know what he was made of, if he was solid, if he was more than a prospect.

And it didn't take long for doubt to be raised. Here they were at dinner at Simon's. This is surely something of an honor. The Pharisees were well regarded officials. They are community leaders. They travel in the well-to-do circles in society. They are opinion makers. So, even a dinner invitation carried with it a certain stamp of approval, even if it were provisional. So, here we are at this dinner, say with Cardinal Law, or maybe Neil Rudenstine, or maybe it's a church supper, and some dissipated woman crashes the party. We don't know exactly what's wrong with her, but that there's something wrong with her is clear enough. Maybe her reputation precedes her. Maybe she has that disassociated look of mental illness. Maybe her clothes and personal hygiene make it clear she doesn't

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belong. This woman who doesn't belong in this company crashes the party, and it gives Simon a chance to see what Jesus is made of.

How will his guest handle the embarrassing situation? Will he display the appropriate attitude toward her? And the answers are immediately obvious. He does not display the appropriate attitude. He does not handle the situation well. He allows her to bathe his feet in her tears. He allows her to dry his feet with her hair. And he allows her to anoint his feet with ointment. He not only allows it, but also seems to relish it. You can imagine the social discomfort rising at this proper social occasion.

Jesus' host begins to doubt. He says to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him--that she is a sinner." If this man were a prophet, if this man were the real thing, if this man were more than a prospect, he would have handled this situation differently. He would have known better. He would have known that she was the wrong kind.

*** This last week the Southern Baptist Convention held its national meeting. This is of no small importance, for the Southern Baptists are the by far the largest Protestant denomination in the country. They are also among the most conservative. This year, for the first time since adopting their statement of faith in 1963 the Southern Baptists found it necessary to add statements to it in order to make it absolutely clear where they stand on two issues, women and non-married, non-heterosexual sexuality.

Regarding the first the Baptists added to their doctrine, "A wife is to submit graciously to the servant leadership of her husband even as the church willingly submits to the headship of Christ. She, being "in the image of God" as her husband and thus equal to him, has the God-given responsibility to respect her husband and to serve as his helper in managing her household and nurturing the next generation."

Regarding the second the Southern Baptists added, "Marriage is the uniting of one man and one woman in covenant commitment for a lifetime. It is God's unique gift to provide for the man and the woman in marriage the framework for intimate companionship, the channel for sexual expression according to biblical standards and the means for procreation of the human race."

The Southern Baptists wanted to make it absolutely clear who isn't acceptable at the banquet. No uppity women. No unmarried couples. And certainly no gays, lesbians or bi-sexuals. Like the Pharisee host in this morning's Gospel story, the Southern Baptists have felt that these things were unnecessary to say before. They have felt that any Christian worth the name certainly knew these people are embarrassments. But since so many of them have been crashing the party, and so many others of us, who presumably should have known better, have

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welcomed them, the Southern Baptists thought it wise to make the obvious perfectly clear.

The Pharisee and the Southern Baptists share not only their thought that certain things are obvious, but also share their belief that what makes it obvious is that the Bible tells them so. And here's the rub. Does the Bible really tell them so. Well, yes and no. The problem with saying that you are going to live your life or build your faith by exactly what the Bible says is that the Bible says a lot of things. And some of those things don't agree with one another. And some of those things are, I'm afraid to say, taken with little seriousness by even the Southern Baptists.

Some of Paul's writings seem to want to keep women in their place – heads covered and mouths closed in church – if he really wrote those. But he also says that in Christ all divisions, even that between male and female, are null and void. Furthermore, there are quite clearly a number of women leaders in Paul's churches. So, the Bible isn't so clear, or obvious, after all. In fact, it is downright contradictory. I suppose that means that you can find whatever you want in it and ignore the contradictory parts, which is what most fundamentalists do.

The Bible and homosexuality is a good example of the other problem. The Bible I have at my desk has 2337 pages. Admittedly some of those pages are introductions, and some are apocryphal writings, so let's say 2000 pages. Each page has between 15 and 25 verses. Let's be conservative and say 15. So, our back of the envelope calculation finds 30,000 verses. Of those 30,000 verses, something like three have been identified to possibly have anything to do with homosexuality, and the meaning of those verses is not very clear. But let's grant them anyway. That's three verses possibly against homosexuality, one one-hundredth of a percent, one verse in 10,000. It's fair to say that the Bible is not nearly as concerned about homosexuality as the religious right is.

But the Bible is quite concerned about some other things. A simple search of words in the Bible finds money mentioned 142 times, poor 171 times, justice 131 times and love a whopping 589 times. And yet these are words seldom found in the rhetoric of the religious right.

Three verses, maybe, about homosexuality, but there are many explicit verses commanding animal sacrifices to God and just how to do them. Why do those who say that they are just following the Bible leave sacrifices out? And that's just the tip of the iceberg. Most people who set out to read the Bible from cover to cover get stuck in the middle of Leviticus. That's understandable. In Leviticus they run into verse after verse of rules and regulations that are of little interest to most of them. It tells you what festivals to celebrate, how to plant the crops and not to eat anything with blood in it. I have met very few people who say they use the Bible as the rule and guide of their life who follow all these prescriptions. But they are there, in the Bible, and very clear, indeed.

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The point is this, the Pharisee who invited Jesus, and the Southern Baptists this last week, have a very clear idea about what is acceptable – about what is acceptable behavior and about who are acceptable people. Both Simon and the Southern Baptists are absolutely certain that those who fail to recognize the obvious standard cannot possibly be prophets or religious people. And they are further certain that what they believe comes unambiguously from their scripture. But the truth is, they are making, they are molding, and folding and fracturing the scripture to make it say what they already believe, just the way those before them found in the scripture justification for racism and slavery. Because the scripture says so many things, they can get away with it, to a degree, or for a while.

But Jesus always avoided convoluted proof-texting. When he was asked what the Bible said, he said, simply, “Love your God with all your heart, mind and soul, and your neighbor as yourself.” When the woman came and washed his feet, he recognized that, whoever she was, or how inappropriate or embarrassing her presence was, she was expressing great love and devotion. And after he ate at the Pharisee’s house, he could be found going “through [the] cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God.” As an aside, Luke tells us that a number of women joined the movement at this point. They clearly understood the implications of Jesus’ message.

And the message is quite straightforward. Is it found in the scripture? Sure it is. But not in tiny fragments twisted to authorize hateful doctrines. It is found in the preponderance of stories, commandments, poetry, and songs which indicate quite simply and beautifully what God wants of us and for us. It is odd that, if we listen to this preponderance, we will almost always run the risk of being perceived as too naive, too simple, like Simon thought Jesus was. But, we could do much worse, couldn’t we? Thanks be to God. Amen.