I invite you to join me in following along in our scripture lesson this morning - Luke 7. As we heard in our Gospel reading, one of the Pharisees hosted a banquet. You may recall that Pharisees were the religious leaders of the day who were so concerned with outward appearances that they failed to consider internal motivations or intent. One of the Pharisees invited Jesus to a banquet. While he was there, a prostitute was part of the uninvited crowded. In that culture, a banquet would have been much more public than a dinner in a private home today. So the presence of uninvited people would not have been unusual. Scripture tells us that the woman was "a woman in the city, who was a sinner." There’s an interesting reference here because the word sinner used here in the original Greek language is the same word used in a previous reference where Jesus is called "a friend of tax collectors and sinners."

At a banquet like this, the guests would have been reclining on pillows, supported by their left arms and eating with their right hands, with their feet away from the mat on which the food would have been spread before them. So the woman could easily get to Jesus' feet. Verse 47 says she brought a jar of ointment. This is key because it shows that she has planned to anoint Jesus. She planned to show him her love.

So this is the context of this account and, remember, there are three main characters in this account- the Pharisee who hosted the banquet, Jesus and the prostitute.

As the woman stood weeping behind Jesus, she began to wash his feet with her tears. Before anyone could stop her, she let down her hair and began to wipe the tears from Jesus' feet and then anointed them with the perfume. She expressed love and gratitude, but she also violated social conventions. Touching or caressing a man's feet could have sexual overtones. So was letting down her hair, so a woman never let down her hair in public. And this woman was known to be a sinner. Assuming she was “unclean,” she would have made Jesus unclean by touching him. So she created quite a scene at the Pharisee's dinner. From his perspective, the woman's act represented a challenge both to his honor and to Jesus'.
We have an advantage when we read scripture because Luke wrote about Jesus' knowledge of what others were thinking. The Pharisee made two assumptions. First, he assumed the woman was a sinner. Second, he assumed that if Jesus was a prophet he would know what sort of woman she was. From these assumptions, both of which appear to have been correct, he draws two false conclusions. First, he concludes that if Jesus knew what sort of woman was touching him, he would not allow it. Second, he concludes that since Jesus has done nothing to stop the woman, he is not a prophet. Let’s peek into Simon the Pharisee's mind. Verse 37: "If this man were a prophet [which he is not], he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him [which he did not because he did not stop her]."

As readers, we already know that Jesus is more than a prophet. And Jesus immediately confirmed that he not only knows what sort of woman touched him but what sort of man the Pharisee is as well. Jesus even knows what the Pharisee was thinking at the moment he thought Jesus was not a prophet.

At these kinds of banquets it was common for the host or guests to pose riddles for one another in order to show off. Jesus poses for Simon a riddle: If a certain patron had two debtors who could not repay him, one who owed a little and one who owed much, and the patron canceled the debt of each, who would love him more?

The answer is so obvious that the Pharisee responds cautiously or with apparent disdain: "I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt." Simon the Pharisee walked right into the trap, exposing his condemnation of the woman's act of love and gratitude. Jesus confirms that Simon has given the right answer. Then, Jesus exposes the contrast between Simon's lack of hospitality and the woman's selfless adoration of Jesus. We learn that when Jesus arrived at the banquet, the Pharisee gave him no water to wash his feet, no kiss, no oil for anointing his head. None of these was required, but they were gestures of hospitality. And Jesus called him out on it. Basically, he said, “Look, before you condemn her, you might want to take a look at the log in your own eye.” We call this a “smack-down” in the military.

If you were raised in a home like I was, we learned about right and wrong. As we grew in maturity, we recognized that right and wrong are not always black and white. I remember when I was about six years old and I was playing with my best friends, Becky and Kellie. One of them was doing something “wrong” – I don’t remember what – but I ran to my mom and promptly informed her of the infraction. I don’t know what she said, but it was something like, “Don’t be a
tattle-tale. No one likes a tattler.” That was the first time I’d heard that word. And I’m absolutely sure I had this look on my face that asked, “But...don’t you want to know what she did?”

Now there’s a time for correction and when the stakes are high, intervention and running it up the chain of command as it were, but my mom was right. No one likes a tattler. And I think this is what Jesus was getting at. “I know what she’s done. And it’s been dealt with. Now stay in your own lane.”

Here’s a question for us to ponder: Did the woman love because she had been forgiven, or was she forgiven because she loved Jesus? Jesus indicated that the Pharisee responded as one who has been forgiven little, while the woman acted as one who has been forgiven much. The fact that she brought the perfume in the first place suggests that she’d already experienced acceptance and forgiveness prior to this event. But there is a bigger issue here. It is not that the Pharisee had less for which to be forgiven than the woman. Rather, because he did not recognize his need for forgiveness he received less. And because she recognized her need and received forgiveness joyfully, she received more.

Unless we see something of ourselves in the character of Simon the Pharisee, we are so blind to our own need that we have failed to hear the story. We are most vulnerable when we are blind to our own faults. Simon thought he was blameless. He "knew" the woman was a sinner, and he assumed she had defiled Jesus. Jesus then exposed the contrast between Simon's distant hospitality and the woman's sincere affection. The contrast was clear, and it left Simon both exposed and embarrassed. First a shameful display of affection from a sinful woman occurred in his house. Second, a guest had called attention to the host's lack of hospitality. In the Middle East during that time and even now, the importance of honor and shame and the family name was and is huge.

Does love lead to forgiveness, or is the ability to love the result of being forgiven? The question is not easily answered because the issue can be seen from both perspectives. Jesus accepted the woman's expression of love as a sign that she had been forgiven much. Love is the natural response of the forgiven, but the capacity to love is directly related to the ability to receive grace, forgiveness, and love. Simon's problem was not his conduct but his attitude and self-understanding. Because Simon thought of himself as pious and righteous, he had no idea what it meant to be forgiven and no awareness of his own need for forgiveness. He loved little because he had experienced so little of God's love. Because Simon did not recognize his need for
forgiveness, he excluded himself from God's grace. On the other hand, because the woman knew she was a sinner, she could receive God's forgiveness. Knowing she was a sinner, she could also know what it meant to be forgiven.

If our lives have been changed by an experience of God's grace, we can never get over the fact that we have been forgiven. Ultimately, that is what salvation is all about. But it cannot be forced or faked; it requires absolute, transparent humility before God.

The irony is that Jesus' readiness to forgive the humble and the sinful was one of the clearest evidences that Jesus was more than just a prophet. Jesus' ability to forgive revealed that he shared the heart and character of God. May we go and do likewise as we receive his scandalous grace.

I invite you to join me in prayer:
Holy, amazing and loving God, It is your grace that teaches our hearts to hold you in reverence. And it is through your grace that we are forgiven and free. Thank you, precious Jesus, for your great love. Amen.