

Luke 7.36-50 (St. Michael's – October 8, 2017)

So life is awkward, right? You ever been in an awkward situation? I remember in high school I once went to a costume party only to discover, when I got there, that I was the only one in costume. I didn't realize that in high school it's actually not cool to go in costume to a costume party. And it was awkward.

I recently saw a video of a Russian Orthodox priest meeting Vladimir Putin. The priest kisses Putin's hand, the standard Orthodox greeting. But Putin reacts like he's just licked him and jerks away. Two very different cultures colliding. Pretty awkward.

Sometimes, however, awkwardness can be sad, and not just funny. I remember a Christmas many years ago. A young cousin, maybe 10 years old, was staying with my family and we were driving home from Christmas dinner. Well as often happens around Christmas, family history came up and someone mentioned in passing that my cousin's mother had been married a couple of times before she met my cousin's father. And I'll always remember my cousin saying in surprise, 'My mom has been married before?' He had no idea. And we didn't know how to respond. It was awkward.

I imagine you may be thinking of some awkward moments in your life right now. And a remarkable thing is that even Jesus found himself in awkward situations. And his response can be instructive.

In our gospel reading from Luke 7 there are at least three supremely awkward moments. You know the story. A Pharisee invites Jesus to a meal. In those days a lot of meals were like block parties, in that they were public affairs. Kind of like our Holy City Connects. And back then the honored guests would recline around a central table, while folks from the neighborhood would gather around the periphery to listen to the conversation.

However, on this occasion, before they even get to the meal something awkward happens. Simon the Pharisee *fails* to offer Jesus appropriate hospitality.

Typically, back then when a guest entered your house you'd greet them with kiss on their cheek, you'd get them a bowl of water to rinse the dust from their feet, and you'd give them a little olive oil for their head to refresh them. But Simon doesn't do *any* of these things.

In today's world it would be like *you* hosting an honored guest and *not* meeting them at the door, *not* shaking their hand, *not* taking their coat, *not* offering them something to drink, and leaving the TV on their whole visit.

Can you imagine something like that happening in Charleston? Gives you the shivers doesn't it?

But that's not even the most awkward part of this meal. As soon as Jesus reclines at the table, a woman steps out from the crowd. And what she does to Jesus would have made everyone squirm.

First, she weeps over Jesus' feet. Then she wipes his feet with her hair. And finally, she anoints his feet with expensive ointment. And everyone in that room would have been scandalized.

First, because this woman had a reputation. She was a notorious sinner, unclean. And in that day it was very important not to associate with unclean people. They were almost like an infectious disease.

But secondly, she lets down her hair. This was not *done* in Jewish society. Righteous women kept their heads covered. Indeed, for a married woman to show her hair in public was grounds for divorce. In today's world it would almost be like a woman taking off her blouse in public. And it's still this way in much of the world. As Ackbar Rafsanjani, former president of

Iran noted, 'It's the obligation of the female to cover her head because women's hair exudes vibrations that arouse, mislead, and corrupt men.'

And so Simon thinks to himself, 'If this Jesus were a prophet, he would know what sort of woman this is who's touching him, for she is a sinner.' You know earlier, in Luke 4, Jesus had declared himself a prophet. Then in Luke 7 the crowds exclaim, 'A great prophet has arisen among us.' But in Simon's eyes the verdict is clear. Jesus *cannot be a prophet* because he tolerates this sinful woman.

And how does Jesus respond to this escalating awkwardness? Does he try to calm things down? Does he try to pacify Simon or smooth things over. No, he takes the awkwardness to a whole new level.

First he tells a parable: 'A certain moneylender had two debtors. One owed 500 and the other 50. When they could not pay, he forgave the debt of both. Now which one will love him more?' And Simon, an astute and thoughtful Pharisee answers correctly. 'The one for whom he cancelled the larger debt.'

And it's here that Jesus cranks up the temperature.

So let me ask you, what would be the only thing more awkward than a host failing in their hospitality? That's right. Publicly confronting them about it! We would *never* do that would we? No, we wait to get back to the car and then tell our spouse, 'Can you believe that?' Right?

But what does Jesus say before a watching crowd?

"Do you see this woman, Simon? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment.'

Yes, Jesus *publicly* points out Simon's failings. Jesus humiliates one of the leading figures of his community. He doesn't care about this guy's status. He speaks truth to power. And he celebrates the faith of this sinful woman.

A couple weeks ago at the 10:30 service, the Rev. Anthony Thompson preached on the parable of the Good Samaritan. And he asked us to do some soul-searching. He asked us, who are we in the parable? Are we the Good Samaritan? Are we the robbers? Are we the priest or the Levite?

And I think we could ask the same question this morning. Who are we in this story? Are we the woman, or are we Simon? How would *we* respond if something awkward like this happened in our own home or church?

You know, a prostitute shows up at Holy City Connects? What do we think? How do we feel? A drug addict comes to church and starts worshipping God in a way that makes us uncomfortable. Maybe too emotional. Maybe there are tears? What does this elicit in us?

Yeah, 'problem people' have a way of exposing our hearts. Do we love them or do we judge or patronize them? You know, if St. Michael's suddenly began drawing crowds of prostitutes and addicts, would we celebrate God's unconditional grace or would we be scandalized by it?

In this passage Jesus shows us what the kingdom of God is like. It's a place of radical grace. Where broken, wandering sheep find refuge. It's a place where the light doesn't hide *from* the darkness, but shines *into* the darkness to overcome and transform it.

My friends, if we don't find this vision appealing, if it makes us uncomfortable, then we would do well to examine ourselves.

And if we're feeling lukewarm, perhaps we like Simon, haven't come to terms with the depth of our sin. Because if we're in touch with our sin, and have offered it to Jesus, then our response will be like the woman's. Worship, gratitude, and love.

Imagine how joyful you'd be today if someone wrote you a check to pay off your mortgage, your student loans, or your credit card. How would you respond? You might be generous to those around you. Or throw a party. So it is in the spiritual life.

When we experience the forgiveness of our own sins, we will be forgiving of others. Grace will overflow. As one theologian puts it, 'It is the forgiven who are the best lovers.'

The trick is seeing *ourselves* in the famous words of *Amazing Grace*. 'Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound that saved a *wretch* like me.' How often do we think of ourselves as wretches? As the apostle Paul put it, 'Oh wretched man that I am, who will save me from this body of death?' Yes, it's only when we see ourselves as sinners in need—*desperately* in need of grace—that we'll be able to offer love and grace to others.

If we don't see ourselves in this way, we'll be like one wealthy Duchess in England. Many years ago she was invited by the Countess of Huntington to hear the great preacher George Whitfield. The Duchess responded to the invitation, 'It is monstrous to be told that you have a heart as sinful as the common wretches that crawl on the earth. This is highly offensive and insulting; and I cannot but wonder that your Ladyship should relish any sentiments so much at variance with high rank and good breeding.'

And yet isn't it tempting to think that somehow status or success or pedigree or education will make us less sinful?

Charlotte Bronte offers a good reminder of the universality of sin when she writes of an elite girl's school: 'I record what I have seen: these girls belonged to what are called the

‘respectable’ ranks of society; they had all been carefully brought up, yet was the mass of them mentally depraved.’

No, the ground is level at the foot of the cross. We are all lost in sin and in need of a savior.

In closing, I’d like to ask one last question. What’s so amazing about this grace Jesus offers? Is it simply that it’s unconditional? Mercy wider than the sea? Well that’s part of it, and yet not the whole.

What’s really amazing about Jesus’ grace is that it’s costly. Notice that Jesus doesn’t forgive this woman from a distance. Rather, he steps into the line of fire and takes her humiliation on himself. He takes her reputation upon himself. He allows his own name to be sullied, as ‘a friend of tax collectors and sinners.’

Not only this, but you may note that in the previous chapter, after Jesus did a miracle on the sabbath, the Pharisees met together in a blind fury to see what they could do to Jesus.

No, this encounter with Simon is not just a really awkward meal. By identifying with this sinner, Jesus is actually providing his enemies with the ammunition to take his life. He’s standing between a condemned woman and her judges and he’s inciting them to take out their judgment on him.

And my friends, Jesus has done the same thing for us. When we are burdened by sin and shame and guilt. When we hear the accusations ringing in our ears. When we feel the impending judgment. Jesus is the one who steps into the line of fire. He takes our place. He takes our shame. He bears the wrath. He’s crushed for our iniquities. And all for love’s sake.

As Hebrews tells us, in Jesus we have a great high priest. A mediator between God and man. Who has shed his blood for us. And who now lives to plead for you and me.

And so today may we acknowledge the depth of our sin, may we run to Jesus for grace.
And out of his costly forgiveness, may we extend that same forgiveness to others. That the
church of Jesus Christ—including St. Michaels—may be known by our love.