

“The Mirror of Christ”

a sermon

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Trinity Reformed Church

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Luke 7:26–8:3

Galatians 2:15–21

As each of us got ready this morning to come to church, most of us used a few important tools (and the rest of us, well, we kind of wish they had!). We used a toothbrush. We used washcloths and towels. We used a hairbrush. And we used a mirror.

That tool, the mirror, is pretty important, but for some of us, it can be scary. It's not because it's difficult to use, complicated in its operation or confounding in its mechanism. No, that's not it. Everybody knows how to use a mirror. It's scary to use because it is, let's say, so *honest*.

Because the mirror is a tool to show you yourself. And what it shows you is not an idealized picture, not an image of what you'd like yourself to be, not an airbrushed portrait of perfection. No, its purpose is to show you what is wrong with yourself, what is out of place or crooked or smudged or off kilter. And at times (say, when you first get up in the morning) that can be a scary sight to behold.

Of course, that may be a *necessary* sight, even if it's scary. Because when you are shown what is out of place or crooked or smudged, you have the opportunity to correct it. But you also learn, once again, that there's only so much you can do, that there are limits to your efforts to beautify and make presentable. So, each morning the mirror shows me who I am, in all my freckled, pale, wrinkly, balding splendor. I am who I am, and the mirror reminds me of that, in case I am inclined to forget.

In the Bible passage I read just a little bit ago, the passage from Luke, we see a woman who, we might say, had looked in the mirror and gotten a clear image of who she was. And it was scary. It did not please her. She looked in a mirror, not of glass but what we might call a moral mirror or a spiritual mirror, and she saw her faults, her failures, all that was out of place and wrong in her life. And all this struck her as a truth she could not ignore and from which there was no escape.

But there was escape, or rather a new opportunity, a new reality, a new creation.

These that were new she found not by her own efforts, not by seeing on her own something else in that spiritual mirror besides the reflection of her own failures. No, she found this new reality in Jesus.

We don't know the back story of this woman — what she had done, how she had met Jesus, what Jesus had said to or done for her — although we do wish we knew. All we know is that the woman, even in her sorrow, is grateful. It's clear — isn't it? — from what she does. She comes into the room where Jesus was dining. She is known to be a sinner (the account from Luke identifies her as one) and she begins to wash Jesus' feet, not with water, but with her tears, and dry his feet, not with towels, but with her own hair. She keeps at this for some time, and then anoints his feet with a jar of costly ointment.

Now, I wonder — don't you? — what led her to do this. And I wonder — don't you? — what it was about Jesus that brought forth those tears and this act of humility.

Perhaps because of him she saw the great contrast between who she was and who she should be.

She was familiar with this contrast, or, rather, ones like it. She felt it, and was made to feel it so often, by other people, those who claimed to be good, upright people. But with them, their moral superiority just made her angry, for she knew that most all of them were hypocrites. She knew that their morality was play-acting, and that they had their hidden vices, while hers were somewhat public. She knew this. But, with Jesus, things were different.

Or perhaps because of him she saw that the excuses she had made for herself didn't really hold up.

She was good at making excuses. They were her defense in a world that was hostile to her, a world that would beat her down and toss her aside. She used those excuses to keep standing, to hold back those who threatened her. With them, these excuses were all she had. But, with Jesus, things were different.

Or perhaps she saw that Jesus was so good, in a way that all the other supposedly good people in town were not, so that she felt judgment that (now, this may sound hard to believe) that did not repel her but beckoned her to come closer, a judgment that was not judgmental but was truly holy.

With them, those people in town, she found nothing inviting, nothing trustworthy. She found their morality to be a threat, because they used it as a cudgel against her and as a cloak for their own emptiness and falsehood. But with this Jesus, she could trust him; she could rely on him; she could find in him the new start, the new life, the forgiveness that she could find in no one else ... especially not in herself. With Jesus, things were different.

It's as if ... she had looked in a mirror, not her own mirror, but in a new mirror that showed her not only who she was, but who she could become. It was as if she had looked in the mirror of Jesus. And it changed her life.

So that's why, it seems, she did what she did that day, why she had bathed his feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. For she ... had been changed.

Others, however, were not changed, nor were they impressed. Actually, they were somewhat embarrassed by the display of this sinful woman weeping at Jesus' feet. They could not understand it, this emotion, this, this — what do you call it? Oh yeah, this "love."

"Oh, please. Give me a break."

That was their attitude. They could not accept it. They could not understand it.

Neither could the host of the dinner party, the one who had invited Jesus there. He could not understand this love, not at all. But of course, he had little understanding of this woman, as he had little understanding of *forgiveness*. For what did *he* need to be forgiven? Come now. He was fine, or so he thought. He was a good person, or so he thought. It seems, in fact, that he saw little in himself that needed forgiveness.

For this reason, his own self-satisfied impression of himself, there was within him very little understanding of the woman whose tears were to him a merely embarrassing spectacle. Nor was there much understanding of the one for whom this woman shed her tears. Really, he did not understand Jesus. He did not understand him, or the forgiveness he made possible. Really, neither did he *love* Jesus.

And so Jesus tells the host and his friends a story. There were two people who owed money to someone. The first owed \$40,000, and the other owed \$4,000. Neither could pay, and so the creditor canceled the debts of both. "So," Jesus asked his host, "who will love him more?"

Hmm. Maybe it's a trick question.

"Well," replied the host, "I guess it would be the one . . . who had the greater debt canceled."

He got it right. He answered well, or well enough. But does he get what this means, for him, for Jesus, for the woman, on that day and in that place?

Jesus points to the woman. "See her?" Jesus asks him. "You gave me no water for my feet when I came here after my trek along dusty roads, but she bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. You greeted me with no kiss, which most any good host in these lands would do, but she has not stopped kissing my feet. You offered me no oil to anoint my head (also the mark of a good host) but she has anointed my feet with perfume. And so her sins, though many, have been forgiven. That is why she shows such love. But one who is forgiven little, loves little."

Those are some tough words. Do you think maybe they stung a little? No wonder Jesus was so popular with the Pharisees!

Actually, maybe these words sting *us* a little. Maybe they make some of us a little concerned, or even confused. What does Jesus mean? Is he saying that only those who have been forgiven some egregious public scandal, who have been brought back from the brink can be truly loving, grateful followers of him? Is he saying that those of us who have had no such dramatic conversion are lesser Christians? Is he saying that those who have no memory of ever not loving Jesus don't in fact love him, or love him less than someone recently and dramatically brought to faith and forgiveness?

No. That is not what he is saying. That is not his point.

Let me put it a different way. I think that what he is talking about is what it means to be in his presence, *truly* in his presence. Now, what is that?

To be in Christ's presence, truly in his presence, is to know that you don't *deserve* to be there, and yet, there you are! It is to know that your best is fraudulent, that you have much to be forgiven even if it's not obvious to others, and yet, there you are, welcomed there by him.

To be in Christ's presence, truly in his presence, is to see not only *him* as *he* truly is. It's also to see *yourself* for who *you* truly are. It is to be presented with his mirror, a mirror that tells no lies, a mirror that shows us who we are. And what we see is not pretty.

Do we not understand that? How aware are we of the mirror of Christ? Have we truly been aware of his presence? If we have, if we are, if we have been with him and stood before the mirror he would provide us, then we would see that all is not right with us, that, although in some sense of the word we are "good people," nonetheless there is much that is wrong with us, too, that there are failures and faults which, although hidden, are

even so real and life-denying and, left unchecked, deadly.

In that mirror, the mirror of Christ, we see that we profess love but practice it only grudgingly.

In that mirror, the mirror of Christ, we see the anger we hide from others, we see the lust, we see the sloth, all these that we have carefully kept hidden perhaps even from ourselves is known to Jesus, and he in his power and mercy makes them known to us.

In that mirror, the mirror of Christ, we see that we have let so little holiness into our lives.

But you can see something else in the mirror of Christ. You begin to see what Jesus sees in you, the "you" Jesus intends for you to be, the "you" that may not be visible yet to anyone besides the Lord.

You see an image of you that is not merely the composite of your sins.

You see more than your failures, and more, even, than your limited successes.

You see that you are forgiven.

You see that you are being restored.

You see that you have a purpose greater than you knew, to glorify God in ways that you may not even now understand.

You see that the meaning of your life lies not in your own hands but in the hands of Jesus.

That's what we see, as we draw nearer and nearer to Jesus Christ.

So, one person washed Jesus' feet with her tears, while the other scoffed.

One person wept because of sins forgiven, while the other felt no need to weep.

One person expressed great love from deep within, stirred up by a greater love from outside, while the other knew no such love nor expressed it.

One person looked in the mirror of Christ, and the other looked away.

Whose example will we follow this week?

Where will we look?