

HER SINS ARE FORGIVEN FOR SHE LOVED MUCH - Biblical Commentary by F. Alberto Maggi OSM

Lk 7.36-8.3

At that time, one of the Pharisees asked him to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and took his place at the table. And behold, a woman of the city, who was a sinner, when she learned that he was reclining at table in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster flask of ointment, and standing behind him at his feet, weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears and wiped them with the hair of her head and kissed his feet and anointed them with the ointment. Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner."

And Jesus answering said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." And he answered, "Say it, Teacher." "A certain moneylender had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he cancelled the debt of both. Now which of them will love him more?" Simon answered, "The one, I suppose, for whom he cancelled the larger debt." And he said to him, "You have judged rightly." 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 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. Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven- for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little."

And he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." Then those who were at table with him began to say among themselves, "Who is this, who even forgives sins?" And he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace." Soon afterward he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. And the twelve were with him, and also some women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of

Chuza, Herod's household manager, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their means.

Three times Pharisees invited Jesus to have lunch with them and each time Jesus made food go down the wrong way. The evangelist writes that *"One of the Pharisees"* – Pharisees were perfect observers of the law, obeying the 613 precepts of Moses' Law – *"asked him to eat with him"*.

In order to comprehend the passage let's keep in mind that the lunch took place only among men, among males. *"He went into the Pharisee's house and took his place at the table"*. The evangelist highlights that there's no sign of courtesy towards Jesus. Then a surprise!

"And behold", when the evangelist uses this expression it means he wants to draw the attention of readers and listeners on something unheard or unexpected that is going to happen. *"A woman of the city, who was a sinner, when she learned that he was reclining at table in the Pharisee's house, brought a flask of ointment"*. In the house of Pharisee, where there's nothing unclean, during one lunch where only male members are present, an unwelcome female individual enters, a sinner, that is a prostitute, carrying with her the tools of her job.

As a matter of fact, the evangelist writes that she *"brought a flask of ointment"*, which was used to massage her clients. Then she takes place behind him at his feet; feet in the Old Testament have a symbolic meaning, a sexual one, *"she began to wet his feet with her tears"*. After this, something even more unheard of and scandalous, *"she wiped them with the hair of her head"*.

We know that at that time women were always veiled; only prostitutes were not. Hair was a sign of great eroticism. Just think of the famous Judith who seduced Holofernes and literally made him lose his head!

Not only that! *"She kissed his feet and anointed them with the ointment"*. This is quite an indecent scene, a very rough one. And here comes the reaction of the pious Pharisee. *"Now when the Pharisee, who had invited him saw this, he said to himself ..."*, and uses an expression of contempt against Jesus, *«If this man were prophet, he would have known and what sort of woman this is who is touching him»*. And the evangelist, in order to indicate the action of 'touching', uses a verb already used by Simon, the Pharisees, which is more like 'to finger', indicating perhaps something more sinful.

«For she is a sinner», so this religious person categorizes people under religion criteria, and sentences that no doubt she is a sinner. Jesus addresses to Simon and then he replies *«Say it, Teacher»*, such a hypocrite! He's judging Jesus but now acts as a disciple who wants to learn. And Jesus starts telling the a short parable of two debtors to a creditor.

“One owed five hundred denarii and the other fifty”. Fifty denarii was the daily salary of a worker, while Five hundred was equal to a monthly pay. The moneylender cancelled the debt of both and Jesus asks: *“Now which of them will love him more?”*

Simon answered reluctantly, *“«The one, I suppose, for whom he cancelled the larger debt»”*. And Jesus said *“«You have judged rightly»”*. And here comes Jesus’ action.

“Then turning toward the woman”, recalling Simon’s gaze, who just saw a prostitute doing something sinful, *“«Do you see this woman?»”* He should not see the sinner, but the woman. And here Jesus recalls traditional sings of hospitality that Simon didn’t address to Jesus, namely the giving of water, meaning receiving, a kiss as a sign of welcome and perfumed oil as a sign of honor.

Well then, Simon didn’t perform any of these actions, but the woman did greatly instead, maybe even excessively. And Jesus sentences, *“«Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven – for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little»”*, by recalling here the parable of the two debtors.

The sinful woman and the Pharisee are both already forgiven by the Lord, as he always forgives in advance, but only the woman is aware of this forgiveness; the woman, a sinner, shows him her gratitude. The Pharisee, who thinks he deserves the love of God, his forgiveness due to his efforts or his merits, is not aware of this free forgiveness.

Thus the evangelist is meaning that the love of this woman is a result of forgiveness. Jesus, the Lord, first displays his forgiveness and then its consequences are displayed.

“And he said to her, «Your sins are forgiven»”, that is they are already forgiven. *“Then those who were at table with him»”*, who were also Pharisees, *“« began to say among themselves, «Who is this, who even forgives sins?»”* This means “who is this who is usurping God’s role?” God is the only one who forgives sins.

But here comes the remarkable and scandalous conclusion, *“And he said to the woman, «Your faith has saved you; go in peace»”*. This woman made a sacrilege; a sinful woman was not allowed to touch a man, especially a man of God as Jesus was, had clearly disobeyed the Law and made a sacrilege. What in the eyes of religion is a sacrilege, in the eyes of Jesus is an expression of faith.

Why doesn’t Jesus say to this woman, as he did with the adulteress, “From now on sin no more”? Because this woman cannot. She cannot help but continue her job, for no one would marry her, not even her own family would take care of her.

And this scandal made Pope Gregory the Great melt three characters in this woman, the anonymous sinner, the one who lives in a this unreviewable situation, Mary the sister of Lazarus and Mary Magdalene. From this merge arose the symbolic character of the penitent Magdalene, the one who comforts the conformists.

But the conclusion of the passage makes us understand something very different. Jesus is not only followed by disciples, but also women, which was something incredible and absurd. Well, here everything leads us to believe that this woman was accepted into Jesus' community and followed him.