***EXTRAVAGANT LOVE***

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Text: Luke 7:36-50

Someone was kind enough to forward to me this week a collection of paraprosdokians (para-pros-dok-i-ans) which are figures of speech with an unexpected ending. Winston Churchill was apparently a fan of these sayings, some of which are quite profound but may require a moment’s reflection. Consider these:

* *Since light travels faster than sound, some people appear bright until you hear them speak.*
* *Knowledge is knowing a tomato is a fruit. Wisdom is not putting it in a fruit salad.*
* *I used to be indecisive. Now I’m not so sure.*
* *I am not arguing with you; I am simply explaining why you are wrong.*

There is a lot of truth in some of those paraprosdokians. One of those in the collection struck me as particularly applicable to Luke’s account of Jesus’ visit to the home of a Pharisee named Simon:

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Simon invited Jesus to dinner at his home. Unlike other Pharisees who sought to trap or test or challenge Jesus, this Pharisee – this stickler for the law – asked Jesus to come and sit at his table and break bread with him. There is no indication of an ulterior motive in this invitation, no plan to ply Jesus with wine and then ask some technical legal question, no hidden cameras to catch Jesus in an awkward moment. The invitation seems to be a genuine act of hospitality. The Pharisee apparently thought the invitation alone would merit the favor of the popular preacher. But he was wrong, because:

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It is vocation, not location that defines a Christian. The Pharisees were rule-followers. They believed that God was best pleased when they followed the letter of the law – dotting all the i’s and crossing all the t’s. Lost upon many of them in their zeal to uphold the letter of the law was any sense of the spirit of the law – especially the law of love.

That law of love was lived out in extravagant form in the Pharisee’s house – not by the host himself – but by the unnamed woman with the alabaster jar and the checkered past. She wasn’t an invited guest. She was a party crasher. When the invitations went out, she wasn’t on the list, not even in the book. She wasn’t the kind of person who respectable people invited to dinner. She was the kind of person respectable people avoided – at least publicly; some men might know her privately, professionally (so to speak), but she would never be invited to dinner. She was a known sinner, and most of the town knew the nature of her sins. She seemed an unlikely candidate to illustrate the holy law of love, yet for two thousand years her actions that day have been remembered. Not a word from her lips is recorded – just her acts – her humble, loving, contrite, self-giving acts.

In Jesus she recognized one who spoke a word of hope not just to the saints in the city but to the sinners as well, one who healed people who had been sick and brought back to life one who had been dead. And this woman was a little bit of both – suffering from a sinsick soul and dying inside. So, she crashed the party and at first no one noticed as she stood at the feet of Jesus with tears raining down her cheeks – the uninvited guest weeping for the sins of her past and present. No one threw her out or made a fuss when she knelt to wash Jesus’ feet with her tears. The guests at the party reclined on pillows and ate in that reclining position, their feet extended away from the low table on which the food had been spread. On the floor well away from the table the woman knelt and bathed Jesus’ feet with her tears and dried Jesus’ feet with her hair and kissed Jesus’ feet with her lips and anointed Jesus’ feet with ointment from her alabaster jar.

Washing another’s feet is an act of humility. We don’t really put our best foot forward with our feet. In Jesus’ day people often went barefoot; even sandaled feet were covered with the dust, dirt and dung from the roads people walked, and there were no showers to wash them off daily. Feet were calloused, cut and bruised from the demands of daily living. Washing such feet was a servant’s dirty duty. Recall that Jesus washed the disciples’ feet to show them the extent of the servanthood he asked of them. Recall that when Pope Francis washed the feet of the poor, including a Muslim woman, the whole world took note of the humility and love he showed. If those foot-washings were regarded as such remarkable acts of humble service, how much greater was the humility and love demonstrated by that woman who bathed Jesus’ feet with her own tears and dried his feet with the locks of her own hair and kissed his feet with her own lips and anointed his feet with the precious contents of her alabaster jar!

Her actions evoked no public rebuke from the Pharisee, but he was quick to sit in judgment – not just of the fallen woman who bathed Jesus’ feet with her tears, but of Jesus himself who allowed her to do so. Jesus’ failure to rebuke the woman was, for the Pharisee, proof that Jesus was not the prophet he had thought him to be. A prophet would have known what kind of woman she was and would have refused to allow her to touch him; a real prophet would have rebuked her and sent her away. Were Jesus a prophet he would have known her history and had nothing to do with her. Or so the Pharisee believed! But instead Jesus accepted her unclean touches without comment. None of this was voiced by the self-righteous Pharisee, so steeped in the law and so clueless about the law of love. Yet, Jesus knew what he was thinking. Jesus always knows – knows us better than we know ourselves, knows our thoughts, our motivations, our hearts. And so he knew what the Pharisee was thinking about the woman and about him.

Our Scottish friend Jim Simpson tells of a Lanarkshire doctor who worked his whole life in a poor mining community. With his worn black leather bag, he visited miners’ cottages to deliver babies and to sit at the sides of dying patients whom he had treated for years. As the doctor himself lay dying, he said to his son, “In the bottom drawer in my filing cabinet you will find all my accounts. Take out the unpaid ones and burn them.” The son did as his father instructed. Shortly after the doctor’s death, the family lawyer inquired about any outstanding accounts that could be collected for the estate. The son had to say, “There are no outstanding accounts,” for there were none. They had all been forgiven and reduced to a pile of ashes.[[1]](#endnote-1)

That true story is akin to the parable Jesus told the Pharisee after discerning his judgmental thoughts. A creditor had two debtors, one of whom owed ten times the amount of the other. Neither could pay. The creditor canceled the debts of both. “Which of the debtors will love the creditor more?” Jesus asked. “I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt,” replied Simon. Simon failed to see that the one who had been forgiven the greater debt was the woman who had shown such great love. It was her multitude of sins that weighed so heavily upon her and inspired her great act of love. Simon had failed to do for Jesus the very things that the woman had done so extravagantly – bathe his feet, shower kisses upon them, and anoint them with ointment. “I tell you her sins which were many have been forgiven,” says Jesus, “for she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.” Simon loved little because he believed himself to be in need of little forgiveness. But the woman loved greatly and needed great forgiveness, and so Jesus said to her, “Your sins are forgiven. Your faith has saved you; go in peace.”

Like the woman with the alabaster jar, we are uninvited guests, party crashers, sinners all. Maybe your sins are as big as the woman’s or bigger, maybe they are as small as the Pharisee’s or smaller, but they are sins nonetheless, for we all are sinners in need of God’s redeeming grace. Be cautious of sitting with the Pharisees and thinking you are the host and Jesus the guest in your life. Be cautious of sitting with the Pharisee and rejecting those sinners whom Jesus would receive. Be cautious of sitting with the Pharisee and neglecting hospitality, of being too proud or too busy or too self-righteous to welcome Christ with love and self-sacrifice. Be cautious of being the Pharisee and loving little because you think you have little for which to be forgiven.

You have been forgiven sins too numerous to name, sins you may not even dare to name. You have been forgiven much, so love much! Love God and your neighbors; love the sinner and the saint; love the prostitute and the Pharisee, your friend and your enemy. Love Jesus who loves you enough to die for you and forgive you and save you.

In his book *The Road to Character*, David Brooks quotes theologian Reinhold Niebuhr suggesting that “*the final form of love…is forgiveness.”[[2]](#endnote-2)* We are called to love in that way – by forgiving others as we are forgiven, by loving others as we are loved. Forgiveness is God’s love in action.[[3]](#endnote-3) Or as Henri Nouwen suggests, forgiveness is “love practiced among people who love poorly.”[[4]](#endnote-4) Practice forgiveness, practice love, for

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But loving and forgiving and living as Christ calls you to love and live and forgive just might make you a disciple of Jesus worthy of the name “Christian”. If you want to be a Christian don’t just come to church and think that is the end of it; go and love as that woman loved Jesus – extravagantly, humbly, sincerely, tenderly, personally, unconditionally, endlessly. Love well and love much for you have been forgiven much, whether you know it or not. Amen

1. Jim Simpson, “Pillow Talk” in *Life & Work*, October 2014, p.47 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Reinhold Niebuhr (1952) quoted by David Brooks in *The Road to Character*, Random House: New York, 2015, pp.46-47 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Ken Blanchard and Wally Armstrong, *The Mulligan*, Thomas Neslson Publishers, 2007, p.86 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Philip Yancey, *What’s So Amazing About Grace?*, Zondervan Publishing House: Grand Rapids, 1997, p.92 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)