

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
Thanksgiving
November 23, 2023
Sermon by Pastor Jon D. Buchholz
Much grace! Much love! Much thanks!

A certain one of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him. Jesus entered the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table. ³⁷ Just then a sinful woman from that town learned that he was reclining in the Pharisee's house. She brought an alabaster jar of perfume, ³⁸ stood behind him near his feet weeping, and began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she began to wipe them with her hair while also kissing his feet and anointing them with the perfume. ³⁹ When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would realize who is touching him and what kind of woman she is, because she is a sinner."

⁴⁰ Jesus answered him, "Simon, I have something to tell you."

He said, "Teacher, say it."

⁴¹ "A certain moneylender had two debtors. The one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. ⁴² When they could not pay, he forgave them both. So, which of them will love him more?"

⁴³ Simon answered, "I suppose the one who had the larger debt forgiven."

Then he told him, "You have judged correctly." ⁴⁴ Turning toward the woman, he said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house, but you did not give me water for my feet. Yet she has wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. ⁴⁵ You did not give me a kiss, but she, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. ⁴⁶ You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with perfume. ⁴⁷ Therefore I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven; that is why she loved so much. But the one who is forgiven little loves little." ⁴⁸ Then Jesus said to her, "Your sins have been forgiven."

⁴⁹ Those reclining at the table with him began to say among themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?"

⁵⁰ He said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you. Go in peace."

—Luke 7:36-50

It is no surprise that Jesus was invited by Simon the Pharisee to dine at his house. Jesus the prophet from Nazareth was a rock star. He had just finished curing many sick people with diseases, had just driven out evil spirits from people, and he had even raised a young man from the dead in the town of Nain. "A great prophet has arisen among us!" people said. News about Jesus spread throughout the surrounding country. So one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him. Jesus went to Simon's house and reclined at the table with him. This was a banquet, a special meal, given in honor of Jesus. It is no surprise that Jesus is invited to the feast!

What *is* a surprise is the unexpected guest at the banquet. She was not invited. She was a woman who had lived a sinful life in that town. Jesus is eating, reclining at the table, enjoying the food and the company, and suddenly the room is filled with the powerful fragrance of perfume because an alabaster jar has been unsealed. A woman is behind Jesus at his feet. She wets his feet with her tears, and she uses her long hair to wipe them off. She kisses his feet and anoints them with the perfume. The room is taken by surprise. No—more than surprise! Those in the room are shocked to see this unexpected company at the banquet. Nobody could miss it, as the smell of perfume filled the air. Everyone could see what she was doing. It was embarrassing. Jesus was the guest of honor, a VIP in this company, but how did *she* get here? Who let *her* in?

I wonder what broken hopes and shattered dreams still lingered in this sinful woman's heart? As a little girl perhaps she had dreamed of happiness, of a stable life, of the love of a faithful man, but those dreams had long since vanished, and in their place was the nightmare of her present existence. Her life was a mess. Her reputation was trash. She was despised by the women of the town. She had not found a man to love her, only men who used her and took her for their own fleshly pleasure. Respectable people would have nothing to do with her. She was an outcast, filled with shame, burdened by her guilt, broken, helpless, and hopeless.

Then she met Jesus. She heard him preach about the kingdom of God. She heard Jesus' invitation: "Repent and believe the good news!" For the first time she met someone who truly loved her. Oh, he could see the sinful things she had done; his piercing gaze and his knowing eye could look right through whatever façade of outward dignity she could put on. Jesus knew the sinful life that she had lived. But he loved her. She was just the kind of person he had come for. He didn't come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance. He had come to seek and to save the lost. So he loved her. Unconditionally. Without reservation. Not in the way sinful men had lusted after her because they wanted to take something from her. His love came with no strings attached. It was love that only wanted to give. He wanted to give this woman hope to replace her despair; freedom to replace her slavery to sin; forgiveness to take away her guilt. In Jesus she had found peace, comfort and joy, and she had even found a place in the kingdom that Jesus preached.

She wasn't welcome at this Pharisee's table, but she trusted that there was a place for her at Jesus' banquet table in the kingdom of God.

And so she came to Jesus the guest of honor for one purpose: to say thank you. She came to worship him, to sacrifice for him, to respond to his love by loving him in return. And that's why the room was fragrant with perfume, and Jesus' feet were wet with her tears, and the other guests at the banquet were mortified, shocked, appalled, that Rabbi Jesus would allow himself to be touched by such a vile creature.

This is the scene Luke paints for us in the Gospel. The Pharisees around the table eating with Jesus are the respected people of the town, but they are self-satisfied, self-righteous, content with the company of other upstanding people and haughty and arrogant. They didn't need Jesus, except to advance their own self-serving interests. (After all, how cool is it to have the most popular and respected teacher in the whole region come and dine at your house.) And they didn't love Jesus. Their thanksgiving came in the form of pleasantries and platitudes, "Thank you for coming, Jesus! It's nice to have you here, Jesus! Thank you for joining us for dinner, Jesus!" The woman at Jesus' feet is contemptible. She has earned the respect of no one. But she is penitent, grieving, sorrowful for her sins. She comes with a broken and a contrite heart. She needs Jesus. She loves Jesus. And she wants to give her everything to thank Jesus. So she pours out her perfume and her tears and her kisses to worship and honor and thank her Savior.

The contrast couldn't be more glaring, the perfect setting for Jesus to teach a powerful lesson. The person who has been forgiven much, loves much and says thank you much. The person who has been forgiven little, loves little and offers little thanks.

It saddens me to think that most Americans will celebrate Thanksgiving without actually giving thanks. It will be for most a day of food and football and family. It's obvious that a mere abundance of material prosperity doesn't lead to an abundance of thanks. We are clearly the most prosperous and abundantly materially blessed nation in the history of the planet, and we get more prosperous every day, yet the number of people who actually thank God for our prosperity keeps going down. It saddens me more to think that many Christians will celebrate Thanksgiving in this great nation without actually pausing to give thanks. Perhaps that's because the most precious gifts God has given us in Jesus can be so easily taken for granted.

So pause for a moment and reflect. Look at your life. Look at your blessings. If you are where you are at in life because of what you've done, because of all the right choices you've made, then I suppose there is no need to give thanks. If your life is all warm and wonderful because you're such a fine, upstanding person, who runs in such fine, upstanding company, who knows all the right people and has made all the right connections, then I suppose there is no need to give thanks to God. You can celebrate Thanksgiving by patting yourself on the back. Make the Thanksgiving holiday a day for self-congratulation:

Give thanks to yourself, for you are good!
And you've got it all together!

But if, as you reflect upon your life, you realize with profound reflection that you are a product of grace, then give thanks to the God of all grace. If you recognize that you are by nature lost and blind, if you realize that you were once dead in sin, but God who is rich in mercy made you alive in Christ, then give thanks to God, who has loved you and saved you. If you recognize the depths from which you have been called and the heights of love and mercy to which you have been raised, then give thanks to God, who has loved you and saved you.

Like the uninvited guest at the Pharisee's banquet, you and I have so much to be thankful for. God in heaven looked down upon us in our wretched state, and he had mercy on us. He gave us Jesus, his only-begotten Son. Our Jesus not only healed the physical infirmities that result from sin in this world—like blindness and disease and demon-possession and death. He not only preached the kingdom of God. He opened the kingdom of God by the sacrifice of himself. He spilled his innocent blood for you and me on the cross. He took our sinful arrogance and pride on himself and placed himself under God's punishment, so that God's anger would never touch us. Just as he said to the woman at his feet, so he says to you, "Your sins are forgiven! Your faith has saved you. Go in peace!" To you much has been forgiven. To you much love has been shown. To you is given the privilege of responding with much thanks.

The sinful woman was not welcome at the table of the Pharisees, but she was welcomed by Jesus. She wanted to be near him, to be close to him, to touch him, to pour out her tears on his feet, and anoint him with precious perfume. She wanted to make this generous, sacrificial act of devotion, thanksgiving and love for one reason: Jesus was her Savior. And her thanksgiving overflowed in tears of penitent sorrow and in tears of unashamed joy.

"Your sins are forgiven." Jesus says those same words to you and to me. And, yes, Jesus has authority on earth to forgive sins. It is the most precious, the most priceless gift you have been given. It's the gift of cleansing of guilt, the gift of freedom from the past, the gift of power to live for Jesus and to follow him, the gift of purpose to live a new and holy life.

And—oh yes!—God also gives you the food and the friends and the family around your table, your health, your wealth, your job, all the material things you enjoy, all in abundance, more than you have asked for, so much more than you need. He pours out his blessings lavishly and abundantly because he loves you and graciously provides for you. But none of them compares to the gift that Jesus gives when he says, “Your sins are forgiven.” Your name is written in heaven.

God has shown you much grace! You have received much love! You get to respond with much thanks!

Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good.
His mercy endures forever. Amen.