



## JESUS AND WOMEN

### LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

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**Lection – Luke 7:36-50; 8:1-3 (New Revised Standard Version)**

#### **Luke 7:36-50**

(v. 36) One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and took his place at the table. (v. 37) And a woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. (v. 38) She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment. (v. 39) Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, 'If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him—that she is a sinner.' (v. 40) Jesus spoke up and said to him, 'Simon, I have something to say to you.' 'Teacher,' he replied, 'speak.' (v. 41) 'A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. (v. 42) When they could not pay, he cancelled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?' (v. 43) Simon answered, 'I suppose the one for whom he cancelled the greater debt.' And Jesus said to him, 'You have judged rightly.' (v. 44) Then turning towards 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 bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. (v. 45) You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. (v. 46) You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. (v. 47) Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.’ (v. 48) Then he said to her, ‘Your sins are forgiven.’ (v. 49) But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, ‘Who is this who even forgives sins?’ (v. 50) And he said to the woman, ‘Your faith has saved you; go in peace.’

### **Luke: 8:1-3**

(v. 1) Soon afterwards he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, (v. 2) as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, (v. 3) and Joanna, the wife of Herod’s steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their resources.

## **I. Description of Liturgical Moment**

The weeks between Lent and Easter are times of preparation and reflection. We especially reflect upon the sacrifices of Jesus. Today’s lection reading points us to those who, in Jesus fashion, have sacrificed so much—women—especially church women. As one of the lectionary contributors (Dr. Marcia Y. Riggs) wrote in the Cultural Resources section for this Sunday on the calendar, and I proudly quote because it needs to be read and heard more than once, “The Gospel of Luke offers a mixed picture of the relationship between Jesus and women. According to gender-sensitive biblical scholarship, Luke’s portrayal of women as followers of Jesus, subjects of his teaching, and objects of his healing is presented alongside women as subservient models of service. The task for readers of Luke is to retrieve those insights within the gospel that respect the experiences of women and thus can contribute to theology that supports the equality of women and men in Christian communities of faith.<sup>1</sup> Historical and contemporary African American women have been successful at retrieving those insights that support, such equality as they sing, pray, testify, and interpret Jesus as their source and strength to overcome their experiences of oppression in church and society.”

## **II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Luke 7:36-50; 8:1-3**

## **Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter**

I would not be part of the Christian community if it were not for Mother Bowman. Her preaching and leadership were the spiritual forces behind my father's call to ministry. I would not understand the nature of an incarnational Gospel message, one that was worked out in the day-to-day struggles of a congregation in the heart of Harlem in the 1970s, if it were not for Sister Williams, the indefatigable leader of a hands-on social ministry, a ministry in which dad worked full-time under Sister Williams' leadership. These childhood memories set up the prism through which I understood the relationship between church leadership and gender. To put it more directly, I never knew there was a "problem" with women in leadership roles. It was striking in my later (teen) years to hear that some "brothers" thought women ought not to participate fully in the full expression of Christian ministry. This was news to me! Bad news.

**And, now, two decades plus later, the fight for my female sisters seeking full ministerial participation is as real in some circles as it has been since Jarena Lee's nineteenth century struggles.** Personally, I choose not to seek ordination in the Pentecostal organization of my upbringing, primarily because of the double-talk on this issue. I come at the passage today with this inclusive sense of the role of women in Christian ministry.

## **Part Two: Biblical Commentary**

Many have noticed that the Gospel of Luke offers a story of Jesus more sensitive to issues related to women. It is not that the author of the third Gospel was a precursor to the womanist movement, by any means, but he (more than likely) was one who was aware of the enormous impact Jesus' mission had on women and men alike.

This scene follows a crucial scene in which John the Baptist sends his followers ("messengers") to determine if Jesus is the expected messianic figure. Jesus' response is revealing: "the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them" (7:22). The passage for this week will show us rather than tell us how the good news has been brought to those outside of the mainstream.

Also, in the larger context, it is fitting in light of a discussion focused on "Jesus and women" that Jesus makes two references to other (unnamed) "mothers" in a comparison of John to others and John to himself: "among those born of women no one is greater than John" (7:28); "wisdom is vindicated by all her children" (7:35).

No female character within the biblical story has been more frequently misunderstood than this unnamed woman of Luke 7. She has been labeled a "sinner" by the author himself. But what kind of sin she has committed is unclear in this story. Many have assumed that her sin was one of prostitution (perhaps implied by her free flowing hair). Others, in Christian history, have identified her as the Mary of Magdalene of the beginning of the next chapter (8:1-3). But that is not likely. What we learn about her in this story is that she was a "woman of the city," a "sinner," "informed" ("learned that ..."), and owned an "alabaster jar of ointment." And, she has come, more than likely, to repay her debt for forgiveness undeserved.

The word “sinner” occurs more in this Gospel than in the other three altogether. Others, such as Peter (5:8) and an unnamed tax collector (18:13) have recognized their status as “sinners.” But this woman, in chapter seven, is the only female labeled as such. The problem of Simon, the Pharisee—that a “sinner” is “touching” Jesus (7:39)—falls in line with the concerns of other Pharisees that Jesus regularly associates and eats with sinners (5:30; 15:1-2; cf. 19:7). Indeed, Simon’s thoughts to himself affect his view of Jesus: “Can this person really be a prophet?” His own theological understanding is at stake, in the manner in which Jesus acts or fails to act. In Simon’s mind, Jesus’ inability to recognize who touches him (and, thereby, could make him impure) disqualifies him as prophet and as a social equal. This thought places Simon’s own dining invitation and reputation in jeopardy. Indeed, the other guests react strongly to Jesus’ actions near the end of this story (7:49). They, too, have a theological problem with Jesus’ presuming the authority of one who can announce the forgiveness of God upon another person.

The setting, after all, is a meal. In the first century, meals defined relationships. They determined social status in first century life. And, as expected, there were patterns to the meal ceremony. The action of this unnamed woman is compared to the inaction of the host (7:44-46). In fact, the role of host has been reversed. This so-called “sinner” woman has become a more appropriate host than the Pharisee Simon himself.

The story about this woman’s anointing of Jesus is as much about this woman as it is about Jesus. **Unlike the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, Luke’s story downplays the messianic implications of this passage.** The “anointing” is upon the feet and not the head; Jesus tells a story about “debts” (and “sins”); the woman’s action (or, “faith”) is elevated as an act of “salvation.” Two major things distinguish Luke’s story from his predecessor’s, Mark’s account. First, its location in the larger narrative differs (cf. Mark 14:3-9). Mark emphasizes this woman’s anointing in preparation for Jesus’ burial. The pre-burial anointing is lost in Luke’s account, both in terms of its location and its description as an anointing of the feet (*not* head). Second, Luke attaches 8:1-3, a story about a group of women who traveled in Jesus’ missionary community. “It cannot be overlooked,” as Stephanie Buckhanon Crowder makes clear, “that these women were a visible and necessary force within the Jesus movement.”<sup>2</sup> These other women who supported the Jesus movement (8:1-3) would not have been thought well of for leaving behind family responsibilities. But their “support” may have implied “reciprocity” for the healing they received from Jesus. Indeed, in light of Jesus’ example in 7:41-43, their “debt” was also great. Renita Weems highlights that the author’s description of a group of women (in terms of character issues) would be preferable to the description of an individual (strange) woman who touched Jesus and wiped his feet.<sup>3</sup> Imaginatively, Weems writes, “Perhaps this is why the women always traveled together, thereby forcing history to remember them as a group, as “sister.” **They stayed together because there is strength and visibility when women band together. They were a community of women among an outfit of men, not apologetic for their numbers, but empowered by their shared vision.**”<sup>4</sup> (Emphasis mine.)

This story establishes the presence of a “community of women” who traveled with Jesus. Like this urban woman, who brought a jar of ointment, other women “provided for” (NRSV) or “ministered to” (from the Greek word diakoneo) the needs of the larger group of disciples following Jesus. Some feminists rightly recognize the patriarchal environment perpetuated by

this description, so that “Luke’s depiction of a female-supported, male-led organization has been mirrored down the centuries by many Christian organizations.”<sup>5</sup> Their acts of kindness, sharing their means, however, were acts of faith that also brought salvation. In the first century culture, repaying one’s debt—or, in these cases, returning favor for one who may have brought deliverance from demons or from sickness—would not be uncommon. Unlike the unnamed urban woman, these women are named (i.e., Mary Magdalene, Joanna and Susanna) and some already held prominent positions in the community (e.g., the “wife of Chuza, a steward of Herod”). Weems, however, provides a womanist critique interpreting Joanna’s life as defined through her husband’s position as her “demons” from which she needed the touch of Jesus: “the demons of having no identity separate from one’s husband’s, no distinction apart from what one owns in life.”<sup>6</sup> Yet, as a close confidant of Jesus, she had now “combined her marriage with her ministry.”<sup>7</sup>

During the season of Lent, this is a story of debt, forgiveness, and actions of faith. This unnamed woman received forgiveness and gave up her tears, her fear of this male-dominated social setting, and her ointment. Jesus announced her forgiveness and “gave up” his reputation in the presence of the other guests and (apparently) his host. What will you give up this season to support the Jesus movement and God’s forgiving and justice— oriented work in the world on behalf of women?

### **Celebration**

The Savior saw the power and place of women so long ago. Thank goodness, we can use his foresight as an example to increase our insight. Jesus accepted women. Jesus was blessed by women. The church is blessed by women. Thank God, for those who accept women and celebrate their gifts to humanity.

### **Descriptive Details**

The descriptive details in this passage include:

**Sights:** The table at which Jesus and the group sat; the woman’s tears hitting the feet of Jesus; the alabaster jar of ointment; the woman drying Jesus’ feet with her long hair; denarii (money) owed on a debt; the woman kissing the feet of Jesus; the woman anointing the feet of Jesus with ointment; the women (Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna, and many others)

**Sounds:** The anger in the voices of those who did not want the woman to intrude; the woman weeping; the voice of Jesus as he sides with the woman and forgives her; Jesus going through villages proclaiming good news; the sound of the footsteps of the group following Jesus through cities and villages

### **Notes**

1. Shaberg, Jane. “Luke.” The Women’s Bible Commentary. Eds. Carol Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe. Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992. pp. 275-292

2. Crowder, Stephanie R. Buckhanon. "Luke." True to Our Native Land An African American New Testament Commentary. Eds. Blount, Brian K., Cain Hope Felder, Clarice Jannette Martin, and Emerson B. Powery. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007.
3. Weems, Renita J. Just a Sister Away: A Womanist Vision of Women's Relationships in the Bible. San Diego, CA: LuraMedia, 1988. p. 87
4. Ibid. p. 88
5. Shaberg, Jane. "Luke." The Women's Bible Commentary. p. 376
6. Shaberg, Jane. "Luke." The Women's Bible Commentary. p. 391
7. Weems, Renita J. Just a Sister Away. p. 91