

**“Down Where the Spirit Meets the Bone”**  
**Luke 7:36-8:1; Psalm 5:1-8**

**Psalm 5:1-8**

<sup>1</sup>Give ear to my words, O LORD; give heed to my sighing.

<sup>2</sup>Listen to the sound of my cry, my Sovereign Ruler and my God,  
for to you I pray.

<sup>3</sup>O LORD, in the morning you hear my voice;  
in the morning I plead my case to you, and watch.

<sup>4</sup>For you are not a God who delights in wickedness;  
evil will not sojourn with you.

<sup>5</sup>The boastful will not stand before your eyes; you hate all evildoers.

<sup>6</sup>You destroy those who speak lies;  
the LORD abhors the bloodthirsty and deceitful.

<sup>7</sup>But I, through the abundance of your steadfast love, will enter your house,  
I will bow down toward your holy temple in awe of you.

<sup>8</sup>Lead me, O LORD, in your righteousness because of my enemies;  
make your way straight before me.

Brief Foreword

For purposes of being able to picture what Luke is about to tell us, as this narrative takes place, dining was done in the Hellenistic style, where, instead of sitting on chairs with laps pulled up under a table, diners would recline, with their feet pointed away from the table.<sup>1</sup>

**Luke 7:36-8:1**

<sup>36</sup>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.

<sup>37</sup>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. <sup>38</sup>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.

<sup>39</sup>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.”

<sup>40</sup>Jesus spoke up and said to him, “Simon, I have something to say to you.”

He replied: “Teacher, speak.”

[And Jesus said] <sup>41</sup>“A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. <sup>42</sup>When they could not pay, he canceled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?”

<sup>43</sup>Simon answered, “I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt.”

And Jesus said to him, “You have judged rightly.”

<sup>44</sup>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 bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair.

<sup>45</sup>You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet.

<sup>46</sup>You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment.

<sup>47</sup>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.”

<sup>48</sup>Then he said to her, “Your sins are forgiven.”

<sup>49</sup>But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, “Who is this who even forgives sins?”

<sup>50</sup>And he said to the woman, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.”

<sup>8:1</sup>Soon afterwards, he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God.

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## The Sermon

Someday, you may find yourself walking along a northerly shoreline on either coast of North America, and there, bobbing in the shallows, or embedded in the grass in a small estuary, you may notice a small, manufactured, buoyant object, faded almost to white.

About 25 years ago, a container ship sailing a far northern route from China to the U.S. ran into a massive storm.<sup>ii</sup> No one was hurt, thank heaven, but buffeted by the 30-foot waves, rolling, pitching, yawing, heaving, swaying and surging, two columns of giant containers were swept from the deck and tumbled into the raging, depthless ocean.

One of the containers burst open, and among its contents were over 28,000 items listed as “bath toys”—more specifically, yellow rubber duckies.<sup>iii</sup>

Still, today, they will occasionally turn up in places all over the Northern Hemisphere. Carried by the tides, they floated in all directions. Some traversed the Arctic Ocean in places no human being has ever been, and floated thousands of miles down into the north Atlantic.

A few years ago, a journalist named Donovan Hohn became interested in the story, and after years of research produced a book about it called *Moby-Duck*.

It’s a fascinating read, but perhaps even more fascinating is to wonder, for each one of those little rubber duckies that has turned up, and the thousands more that are still out there: What epic journeys have they been on?

Each one has traveled untold thousands of miles, endured astounding environments, weathered unfathomable storms, existed day in and day out under the vast sky of God’s infinite and awesome creation. Each one has its own breathtaking story, has been on a voyage of unimaginable proportion, an almost cosmic odyssey. And it has somehow arrived where it is, weathered, faded, but somehow whole.

Which isn’t a bad way to describe you and me, and the people we welcome around us, and the people we don’t welcome around us.

Jesus had been invited to eat at the home of a Pharisee named Simon, and was at table in the customary way when a person came in to show the honor in which they held Jesus, to undertake an act that would demonstrate utter humility, unqualified gratitude—I believe the word I’m looking for is “love.”

And as the person who is identified only as “a woman from the city who is a sinner” cries unrelenting tears, and washes his holy feet with them and anoints them with oil, Jesus is fully aware that his host is looking at this person with open disdain.

Simon the Pharisee is judging her directly for being who she is, or seeming to be what she seems to be, or having done whatever she does—habitually, apparently. And he is judging Jesus indirectly, for tolerating her company.

That would seem to be enough for Luke and for all of us who read this narrative to dismiss Simon as obviously on the wrong side of history and theology, and it might be kind of fun to regard him in the worst possible light and kind of make fun of that.

But there is something to this Simon; there has to be. He has invited Jesus into his home—to come in for a meal, and not just to grab a quick sandwich, but the kind of meal where you “take your place at the table.”

That’s kind of surprising, though, since Simon is one of the Pharisees, who stood apart from the crowds who had come to hear John the Baptist declare a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. While crowds of citizens and soldiers and even the despised tax collectors came out to hear John’s message and be baptized, Simon and the other Pharisees quite publicly declined the invitation.

And, at this point, Jesus has already called out his critics, not least the Pharisees, for their hypocrisy. He had just said,

“John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine,  
and you go, ‘He has a demon’;  
the Son of Man has come eating and drinking,  
and you say, ‘Look, a glutton and a drunkard!’”<sup>iv</sup>

(One of my favorite cartoons I ever saw had a Dad reading a newspaper and the kid comes into the room and says, “Want to hear what I learned in Sunday School today, hypocrite?”)

But still, Simon invited Jesus to come and recline at his table. He didn’t have to do that.

Maybe Luke knows there would be some irony, and more than a little hypocrisy of our own, if we were to dismiss Simon without at least noticing that, and wondering if there is more going on than meets the eye.

Miller Williams wrote:

“Have compassion for everyone you meet, even if they don’t want it. What seems conceit, bad manners, or cynicism is always a sign of things no ears have heard, no eyes have seen. You do not know what wars are going on down there where the spirit meets the bone.”<sup>v</sup>

Recently, I had the privilege of being part of a group of clergy who toured Israel together. Among the places we went was the Sea of Galilee. It was astonishing to be able to look around at the shoreline and to know that Almighty God enfleshed—our hero, our savior, the one who teaches us how to be fully human—knew this very same view in the very same place like the back of his hand.

It reminded me how much I love this guy—I remembered how much I *like* this guy.

That sounds almost sacrilegious—Oh, you *like* Jesus, do you? I’m sure the Author of Life, the Eternal, Creator of the Universe, is all a-twitter with excitement about having met with your approval.

Like the myth about Britain’s top military commander in World War II, General Montgomery, who was so arrogant they used to say that he had said, “God said, and I think rightly...”

But I love what Jesus does and doesn’t do when the person is in the room who is “known as” one who doesn’t belong—

whose presence alone is treated as detrimental;  
who is treated as an outsider, an outcast,  
a blight on any place they happen to be;  
who is regarded as the kind of person you don't want  
dating your children, or  
entering a certain restroom, or  
walking down a street near you:

When I was in seminary on the South Side of Chicago back in the 1990s, my friend and roommate Calvin—an African American guy from Los Angeles; a kind, gentle, bookish teddy bear of a guy—told me that when he would walk down 53rd Street to get his groceries, he could hear the car doors being locked as he passed by.

When Jesus knows that someone is looking in judgment at someone else for who they are, or who they seem to be, or what their reputation is,

I love the fact that he doesn't treat the person being judged as a "problem" to be solved or assuaged. He goes first to where the problem really is.

Simon the Pharisee said to himself, "If Jesus were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him."

And Jesus spoke up and said, "Simon, I have something to say to *you*."

Luke has declined to recount a story that Mark had told—Matthew didn't seem to want any part of it either—where Jesus restored sight to a blind person at Bethsaida.

According to Mark, when Jesus had put saliva on the person's eyes and laid his hands on them, he said, "Can you see anything?" And the person said, "I can see people, but they look like trees, walking."

Then Jesus laid his hands on their eyes again; and this time, they looked intently, and their sight was restored, so they could see everything clearly.

Some scholars believe Matthew and Luke left that story alone because they didn't know what to do with the idea of Jesus not being able to bring about complete recovery the first time.<sup>vi</sup>

But many years ago I heard an African American preacher in Louisville during a pulpit exchange with a mostly white church, and he said that sometimes even people touched by Christ need a “second touch,” because they still can’t see people as people.

It is so mysteriously hard for good people to learn not to pass judgment, even non-threatening judgments, even when our conclusions about others seem so obvious.

My son was traveling a few years ago, and had stopped in a diner or something for a short rest. He got out his smart phone and was checking directions, or the weather, or any of the thousand pieces of information you can pick up these days with that technology that are useful and necessary when you’re on the road.

An older guy came in and walked toward an open table, and as he passed by John’s table, he looked down at the very young adult who was looking at his phone, and the older guy—who must have just been waiting to say this to some young person with a cell phone—stopped John and said, “You know, there’s a whole world out there.”

Isn’t that just adorable?

A while later, after lunch and ready to go, my son was walking out of the restaurant, and passed by the table where that man was sitting. And he noticed that the man was sitting with a newspaper, in which his head was absolutely buried. He didn’t look up, and didn’t even seem to know that anybody was there, he was so into his paper.

And I have never been more proud of my son. Do you know what he said?

He said nothing.

*I would have exploited that moment; I would have said, “Hey buddy, you know what? There’s a whole world out there!”*

I’d tell that story till kingdom come, starring me as the brilliant and entirely justified and frankly hilarious protagonist. That would be Number One in my Greatest Hits collection. I’d preach that story every year on the Sunday closest to my birthday.

It's amazingly refreshing when our children teach us lessons about things like magnanimity; mercy; leaving alone what ought to be left alone; forgetting about an eye for an eye, and just saying what's worth saying and not saying what isn't worth saying.

We treat it as so complicated to overcome our need to judge people, to be unkind to people, to take out our frustrations on people, to act on our fears about people.

But we never know, until we are told,  
*what wars are going on down there  
where the spirit meets the bone.*

Pablo Casals, the most legendary cellist in the history of the world, a tremendous human being of the 20th century, famously said, "Each second we live is a new and unique moment of the universe, a moment that will never be again. And what do we teach our children? We teach them that two and two make four and Paris is the capital of France. When will we also teach them what they are?"

"We should say to each of them: Do you know what you are? You are a marvel. You are unique. In all the years that have passed, there has never been another child like you. Your legs, your arms, your clever fingers, the way you move. You may become a Shakespeare, a Michelangelo, a Beethoven. You have the capacity for anything.

Yes, you are a marvel. And when you grow up, can you then harm another who is, like you, a marvel? You must work," said the greatest cellist who ever lived, "we must all work—to make the world worthy of its children."<sup>vii</sup>

I have been deeply moved by the work of a recent Princeton seminary graduate whom some of you may know named Colleen Toole. When Colleen encounters the God who makes every single child a marvel, no matter who they are, or how they are, or how they self-identify, the words that resound off page of sacred scripture and into human hearts resonate with the gentle and thunderous love of the Almighty:

*I see you, and I love you.  
I created you sacred and beautiful.*

*And when the world cannot hold you,  
when pronouns and bathrooms cannot hold you,  
when your co-workers and friends and family and your church  
cannot hold you*

*I am here.*

*And I am holding you close to me, for you are my beloved.*

*And I am so sorry for how this broken world breaks you.*

*And I am here working for you,*

*working so that one day you may find a home.<sup>viii</sup>*

What a welcome message that is for every one of us, perhaps most of all for all those of us who are, in the advent, incarnation, and transcendence of Jesus Christ, now officially relieved of the responsibility of having to dehumanize themselves by excluding and ridiculing and hating and suspecting and mistrusting and despising and disenfranchising. We can stop that now; Almighty God has declared open the doors of the Church of Jesus Christ, and the Spirit is calling everyone in—or, as many of us are feeling it in an even more pronounced way, calling the Church *out* into the world.

That means all of us: 28,800 faded, rubber duckies, cast into the world by swirling storms or just falling off a boat, bobbing and floating as the tides carry us on our own epic journeys, thousands of spectacular miles, days and nights at sea becoming months and years and decades.

*Give ear to my words, O LORD; give heed to my sighing.*

*Listen to the sound of my cry, my Sovereign Ruler and my God,  
for to you I pray.*

*O LORD, in the morning you hear my voice;*

*in the morning I plead my case to you, and watch.*

*Lead me, O LORD, in your righteousness;*

*make your way straight before me.*

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<sup>i</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*. Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1991; p. 127.

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<sup>ii</sup> Donovan Hohn, *Moby-Duck: The True Story of 28,800 Bath Toys Lost at Sea & of the Beachcombers, Oceanographers, Environmentalists & Fools Including the Author Who Went in Search of Them*. New York: Penguin, 2011.

<sup>iii</sup> This is a bit of streamlining. In fact, the load consisted of 7,200 each of yellow ducks, red beavers, blue turtles and green frogs. (Hohn, 2011, p. 10.)

<sup>iv</sup> Luke 7:33-34.

<sup>v</sup> Found in Miller Williams, *Some Jazz a While: Collected Poems*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999; p. 254.

<sup>vi</sup> Hammond & Busch suggest this in *The English Bible: The New Testament and the Apocrypha—Norton Critical Edition*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2012; p. 99.

<sup>vii</sup> This quote from Pablo Casals is believed to be genuine but doggedly resists online verification. It does not seem to be found in his moving autobiography, *Joys and Sorrows*, though it would fit right in.

<sup>viii</sup> Colleen Toole, “I See You,” presented in the podcast *Thirty Seconds or Less* (<https://www.facebook.com/search/top/?q=colleen%20toole%20posts>).