

# The Heart of God

Luke 7:36-50

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

By: Ryan Dueck

September 14, 2025/Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost

---

Last Sunday, I introduced our fall sermon series. We're going to be reflecting on themes from a book that I read on my sabbatical called *The Big Relief* by David Zahl.

We're going to ponder "the urgency of grace for a worn-out world" and how the gospel offers the relief that we most need.

Today's theme comes from chapter two of the book which is called "Forgiveness: The Relief from Regret."

I want to begin with a cartoon. This one goes way to back to the late 1950's and a comic strip called Peanuts. I grew up on these comics. They were in the daily newspaper (if you're under 30, you can ask ChatGPT what those are). I think we even had a few comic books.

Peanuts and Calvin and Hobbes were my favourite comics. As a kid, I had no idea that they were both exploring the human condition in all kinds of interesting and theological ways. I just thought they were funny.

I liked Charlie Brown and Snoopy and Lucy and Pigpen... And Linus Van Pelt who shows up in this scene.

(show comic strip).

For those who can't see the screen, Linus has evidently expressed a desire to be a doctor which sets the scene for the following exchange:

1. Lucy says to Linus, "You, a doctor? Ha! That's a big laugh! (Lucy would have run afoul of our cultural orthodoxy about being true to ourselves and following our dreams!)"

2. She goes on: You could never be a doctor. You know why? Because you don't love mankind, that's why! (Lucy also wouldn't win any prizes with her use of "mankind" instead of the more inclusive "humankind." I think Lucy would have found herself in the HR office pretty quickly in our time.)
3. Linus responds thus: *I love mankind; it's people I can't stand.*

I suspect that most of us can, at various points of our lives and to varying degrees, identify with Linus.

"Humanity" as an abstract category seems entirely worthy of love and good will and compassion and benevolence.

But individual human beings? Well, that's another matter entirely. Individual human beings can be difficult creatures to love. Perhaps you've noticed this.

Actual people can be needy and annoying and confusing. They can talk too much and listen too little. They can be full of wrong opinions on all the things that we care about deeply and are (obviously) right about.

They can be lazy and undisciplined. They can be destructive and careless. They can be self-righteous and full of themselves. They can be deceitful and ungrateful. I could go on.

Now, I *hasten* to add that individual human beings can also be wonderful and inspiring and beautiful in all kinds of ways.

But the point is that humanity as an abstract category is far easier to have warm feelings about than the actual human beings that we cross paths with every day.

\*\*\*

Our text this morning is in the seventh chapter of Luke's gospel is the story of, among other things, loving actual human beings. It's the story where Jesus is anointed with perfume by a "sinful" woman.

A quick note about this story. As you likely know, the four gospels often contain the same or similar stories from the life and ministry of Jesus. Matthew, Mark, and Luke share the most in common. John is a bit different than the others.

All four gospels record a story about a woman anointing Jesus with perfume. But these are not the same story.

- In Matthew and Mark, the story takes place at the home of Simon the Leper and involved an unnamed woman. These two seem to be the same story.
- In John, it takes place at the home of Lazarus, Martha, and Mary, and the woman anointing Jesus is identified as Mary of Bethany. This could be a variation on the story in Matthew and Mark.
- These stories all take place near the end of Jesus' ministry, and the anointing is described as a preparation for burial.

Luke's gospel is a different story. It takes place much earlier in Jesus' ministry and in a different region (Galilee, not near Jerusalem).

In Luke's story, the woman is not named but she is identified as a "sinner." And in Luke's gospel, it takes place at the home of Simon the Pharisee (not Simon the Leper—of *course* they both had to be named "Simon!").

So, there are at least two, possibly three different stories in the gospels (scholars disagree about whether John's is different than Matthew and Mark's). But that Luke's story describes a different event, nearly all scholars agree.

Ok, on to the story.

Jesus is invited to the home of a very religious man—Simon the Pharisee. I imagine Simon was looking forward to an enjoyable evening with this enigmatic rabbi that he'd invited over.

They'd have a nice meal, perhaps a glass of wine or two. They'd talk theology, sort out some categories, scratch an intellectual itch or two.

I imagine he was looking for an evening of refined conversation with a "person of interest." Who knows, maybe they'd even talk about God's love for "humanity?"

And then, inconveniently, a human being shows up. A woman, to make things worse. And worse still, a *sinful* woman. A prostitute, possibly, although we're not told specifically.

The sinful woman rather embarrassingly falls at Jesus' feet. She weeps uncontrollably. She begins to rather embarrassingly fawn over Jesus, bathing his feet with kisses and tears, anointing his head with expensive oil.

The scene was uncomfortable and inappropriate in all kinds of ways, and the Pharisee says as much. *If this Jesus were any kind of prophet, he would know what kind of woman was touching him!*

She makes quite a scene. And Simon the Pharisee does not approve.

It would have been much more enjoyable to keep talking about God and love and “humanity” without this miserable human being showing up to complicate things.

And the “sinful woman” was both—miserable and a human being. She had done bad things. Things that she ought not to have done. Things that she probably knew better than to do. Things that her life's circumstances and social context seemed to force her into. Her sins, Jesus says, were “many.”

(Jesus doesn't attempt to excuse or downplay anything and he doesn't exonerate her by casting her as a victim and nothing more.)

I've probably read this story dozens of times in my life. But I only recently noticed—*really* noticed—what Jesus says in verse 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.**

I think that I have often instinctively conflated this passage with some of Jesus' other words about the reciprocal logic of forgiveness. *If you don't forgive, you won't be forgiven*, or something like that.

I expected to hear Jesus say, “I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven, therefore she, too will forgive...”

But that's not what Jesus says. He says that because her sins, which were many (and it's important to think of real annoying, inconvenient, selfish, destructive sins, here, not just “sin” as a remote abstraction) have been forgiven, *she has shown great love.*

And then Jesus, as he is prone to do, goes on:

But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.

That's an interesting formula.

Is Jesus saying that there is a connection between our inability or, more likely, our unwillingness to love—humanity or, more importantly, human beings—and the degree to which we have experienced forgiveness? I think he is.

Is Jesus saying that sinners who keep screwing up their lives and weeping at Jesus' feet sometimes have a capacity for love that those of us who (think) we have our act together do not? I think he is.

And given what I know of Jesus, I think he might be saying even more than that. He might be saying that those of us who think that we don't have much to be forgiven for could do with a bit of a rethink there.

Jesus is clear to Simon (and to us): Our capacity for love flows out of our experience of being forgiven.

Jesus then says three things directly to the woman. "Your sins are forgiven," "Your faith has saved you," and "Go in peace."

These are three pretty remarkable statements. They are all the more remarkable given the scene that they are in response to.

The woman, so far as we know, has said precisely nothing. She has made no professions of faith in Jesus' lordship. She has not itemized and repented of her sins. She has not discussed theology with Jesus. She has not prayed or recited a creed. She has not verbally assented to a statement of faith. She has not declared her intentions to march off with Jesus to change the world.

We don't know what has taken place before this scene—perhaps Jesus has had previous interactions with her.

But if we confine ourselves to the story as it has told, what the woman has done is shamelessly thrown herself at Jesus' feet in a context where she would have been most unwelcome.

She has ruined a nice dinner. She has caused a scene.

And yet it is her posture, not the approach of the Pharisee, that Jesus praises. This, apparently, is evidence of the love that Jesus longs to see.

This is the kind of thing that can only be done by someone who knows that their sins—which are many—have been forgiven.

\*\*\*

Ok, let's pivot briefly to the book. At one point in chapter two of *The Big Relief* where David Zahl it is talking about forgiveness, marriage comes up. He says:

A therapist once told me that the best marriages she knew were the ones in which people had figured out a way to let go of the past. The most lasting, loving relationships, in other words, are grounded in forgiveness... **Relationships where the past is overactive, where old injuries are trotted out at a moment's notice, are relationships that end.**<sup>1</sup>

I sat with that phrase “where the past is overactive” for a while.

It seems to me that at the heart of every conflict, whether it's a troubled marriage or it's political violence (which we have seen yet more troubling evidence of this week in Utah) or the rhetorical violence that is everywhere these days or seemingly endless global conflicts (Israel/Palestine, Russia/Ukraine, etc.) or everything in between...

...is an overactive past. We can't let go. We often don't *want* to let go. The past is so easy to weaponize and we are often so eager to do this.

In Luke 7, Simon the Pharisee was quite eager to weaponize the woman's past. Her sins disqualified her. She had no business in his home or in Jesus' presence.

---

<sup>1</sup> David Zahl, *The Big Relief: The Urgency of Grace for a Worn-Out World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2025), 36.

The past was overactive, in Simon's mind. There was no room for a new, better story to be written.

To make room for something new, we need something closer to the heart of God. That something is forgiveness.

A forgiveness that doesn't just gloss over sins and say, "it's ok." A forgiveness that names wrongs for what they are, that acknowledges the pain they cause, that tells the truth and then says, the only way forward is to forgive.

This is what Jesus gave the woman in the home of Simon the Pharisee.

\*\*\*

And this is the gift that he would offer until his dying breath and beyond.

For a few years now, I have been pondering the scene of Christ on the cross in Luke 23, where he looks down and says:

Father, forgive them. They don't know what they are doing.

There is so much going on in this one sentence.

Jesus is enacting his own teaching, right to the end. *How many times should I forgive someone who sins against me?* Seventy times seven. In other words, forgiveness without end.

This was and is some of Jesus' most difficult and desperately necessary teaching. And he embodies it in his darkest hour.

He could have said any number of things as he neared the end. He could have said:

*Father, convict them of their sin. May their wickedness receive the punishment it deserves!*

*Father, condemn them. They should have known better.*

*Father, make this a turning point in their lives. Use my death as a teachable moment so they'll do better in the future.*

*Father, shame them. May the weight of what they are doing weigh them down with a heaviness that brings repentance.*

*Father, rebuke them, overrule them, judge them, expose them.*

He obviously didn't say any of these things.

With his dying breath, he prayed for forgiveness for those extinguishing his life.

Before they asked for it. Before they were convicted of their need for it. Before the idea of repentance even existed as a rumour on the horizon of their darkened minds. Even while they were still actively and eagerly snuffing out the light of life.

He prayed this for the individual human beings responsible for taking his life and for all humanity.

Jesus has the capacity to love both, even if Linus Van Pelt doesn't, even if we often don't.

**I want to end by leaving you with one simple question: Is there an area of your life where the past is overactive?**

Is there some relationship, some attitude, some group of people, some cultural script, some political narrative, some inner monologue where the past is putting your present and your future in a straitjacket?

Is there some area where God is inviting you to lay down the scorecard and live into something better?

Is there some area where God is saying to you, "your sins, though they are many, are forgiven. Now go and love."

One thing I know for sure. Forgiveness is the path to new life and to a love beyond scorekeeping.

1 Corinthians 13 contains some of the most beautiful language about love in all of Scripture. We know it well.



*Love is patient, love is kind...*

*And now these three remain, faith, hope, and love... but the greatest of these is love.*

The older I get, the more I am convinced that perhaps the most important verse in that passage is verse 5: "Love keeps no record of wrongs."

This is a love that is beyond us, in so many ways. We are such persistent record-keepers.

But if we are to make any progress in this love that expresses the heart of God, we must learn forgiveness.

We must receive it, and we must give it.

May God forgive our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Over and over and over again.

Amen

