

Blogging toward Sunday

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When you have long hair and perfumed oil and kissing feet and a sinful woman in the same pericope, it's hard not to think of sex. No wonder Christian commentary has for centuries assumed that this woman is a prostitute. No wonder church Fathers talk about her "fornication" and "lewdness," calling her "the whore." Ephrem of Syria describes her "casting from her hands the enticing bracelets of her youth. . . casting away from her body the tunic of fine linen of whoredom. . . drawing off and casting from her feet the adorned sandals of lewdness." It's as if he's narrating a striptease. The idea that if a woman is a sinner she is a sexual sinner seems a little one-dimensional, maybe even the product of the male imagination.

A woman letting her hair down could be an erotic thing, but it was also something women did in grief and in mourning and out of shame. Her actions are certainly sensual, but so is kissing your baby or preparing a body for burial. Her sensuality doesn't mean she's a "whore." She's weeping.

Jesus asks Simon, "Do you see this woman?" Simon apparently hadn't really seen her, and I wonder if we continue to be unable to see her. She may have been old; her hair may have been gray, not silky and brown. She may have had crooked teeth, brown teeth, missing teeth, wrinkled skin, eyes filmed over with cataracts. Maybe she wasn't a "sexy" "loose" woman with scented oil bent before a man, but a woman desperately grieving or grateful. Her sin might not have been being sexy; it may have been being cruel and calculating and mean. Read 1 Kings 21, where Jezebel arranges the death of poor Naboth who would not give his vineyard to the king; we see that there is a whole range of women's sinfulness. I think most women are well aware of this. I have moments where I think, by the grace of God, I can see my "sin" and it generally has nothing to do with my sexuality. It's my judgment and my inability to love the other and my scapegoating tendencies and 8,000 other things that make me a sinful woman.

I think we need to take Luke seriously when he says she was a sinner. We probably wouldn't have liked her or been at all attracted to her. And Simon may have been great and beautiful and kind. When he thinks to himself that Jesus must not know who this woman is, maybe he wasn't being an obviously horrible judgmental prig. Maybe he knew how she beat her children or poisoned little kittens. Jesus eats with tax collectors and sinners. Tax collectors weren't just "good" people that the world ostracized. They worked for the Roman Empire and extorted money from the poor. They did things that hurt people. And we probably would have liked the Pharisees. Though the text (obviously) often portrays them negatively, they passionately believed that their faith was expressed in acts of loving kindness, especially to the poor. They are the rabbis who made the word of God alive.

I don't think we'll get to the beauty and complexity of forgiveness and the grace of God

until we are somehow given to see that Jesus is really on the side of the sinner. When you glimpse this, it's always breathtaking. In this story Jesus takes the side of the sinner against the righteous. Paul Tillich says, "Here we approach a mystery, which is the mystery of the Christian message itself in its paradoxical depth." The truly sinful woman is truly forgiven. That's earth-shaking. It's the kind of thing that could send you into paroxysms of intense joy or anger, get you down on the ground weeping with gratitude, or up in arms over the impropriety of it all. Tillich says, "There is no condition for forgiveness." This is basic to our faith, and yet we can hardly keep ourselves from believing in the conditions—if not for the people we like, then at least for George Bush or for Osama Bin Laden. Perhaps God's grace is always offensive unless you are the one receiving it, in which case you might take down your hair and weep and kiss someone's feet.