



Jesus' surprising reversals—part 5

to whom little is forgiven, the same loveth little

| Luke 7.³⁶⁻⁵⁰

³⁶And one of the Pharisees desired him that he would eat with him. And he went into the Pharisee's house, and sat down to meat. ³⁷And, behold, a woman in the city, which was a sinner, when she knew that Jesus sat at meat in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster box of ointment, ³⁸and stood at his feet behind him weeping, and began to wash his feet with tears, and did wipe them with the hairs of her head, and kissed his feet, and anointed them with the ointment.

³⁹Now when the Pharisee which had bidden him saw it, he spake within himself, saying, "This man, if he were a prophet, would have known who and what manner of woman this is that toucheth him: for she is a sinner."

⁴⁰And Jesus answering said unto him, "Simon, I have somewhat to say unto thee."

And he saith, "Master, say on."

⁴¹"There was a certain creditor which had two debtors: the one owed five hundred pence, and the other fifty. ⁴²And when they had nothing to pay, he frankly forgave them both. Tell me therefore, which of them will love him most?"

⁴³Simon answered and said, "I suppose that he, to whom he forgave most."

And he said unto him, "Thou hast rightly judged."

⁴⁴And he turned to the woman, and said unto "Simon, Seest thou this woman? I entered into thine house, thou gavest me no water for my feet: but she hath washed my feet with tears, and wiped them with the hairs of her head. ⁴⁵Thou gavest me no kiss: but this woman since the time I came in hath not ceased to kiss my feet. ⁴⁶My head with oil thou didst not anoint: but this woman hath anointed my feet with ointment. ⁴⁷Wherefore I say unto thee, her sins, which are many, are forgiven; for she loved much: but to whom little is forgiven, the same loveth little."

⁴⁸And he said unto her, "Thy sins are forgiven."

⁴⁹And they that sat at meat with him began to say within themselves, "Who is this that forgiveth sins also?"

⁵⁰And he said to the woman, "Thy faith hath saved thee; go in peace."

i Introduction to the series

Today's homily is the fifth in a series of homilies entitled: "Jesus' Surprising Reversals." This series of homilies is focused on the Gospel of Luke, as he among the Gospel writers best epitomizes this theme. Or so it seems to me.

In this series of homilies, we examine how Jesus challenged, resisted, and—at least in his own life and ministry—reversed the world's value system, especially as it weighed and still to this day weighs, the worth of individuals, or, in the language of the Doctrine and Covenants, "the worth of souls."¹ In challenging, resisting, and reversing the world's twisted value system, Jesus surprises us by the individuals with whom he associates and the individuals whom he holds up as role models. He also surprises us by being critical of the sorts of people whom society thinks of as heroic and looks to as role models. We watch as Jesus brings a reversal of fortune to those whom he serves and a changing of the guard when it comes to role models of discipleship.

I might have named this series, "Jesus' *Offensive* Reversals," for his reversals often offended those who witnessed them—in word or deed. However, Jesus' reversals as recorded by Luke were intended to do more than surprise. And they offended only to the degree that they challenged, resisted, and reversed the world's value system, especially as it weighs the worth of individuals.

I believe, in fact, that Jesus' challenge to and reversal of the world's value system belongs near the top of any list concerning the purposes and objectives of his life, his teaching, and his ministry as a whole. Even more recognized and appreciated aspects of Jesus' ministry—his healings, for example, or his teachings, or even his atoning sacrifice, death, and following resurrection, ascension, and enthronement—even these represent a challenge to and reversal of the world's influences and values.

Jesus' challenges to the world's value system, however, are about more than simple ethics, as

¹ DC 18.¹⁰

important as those are. They go beyond matters of how mortal beings conduct themselves vis-a-vis others while living on this celestial planet. His challenges are more far reaching than the temporal existence of this world. His challenges to the world's current value systems have applications to the cosmos and how immortal beings exist and endure in the eternal realms. And, as always in Jesus' intentions, they teach us something of the character of God, Himself.

Introduction to today's homily

In obedience to his Heavenly Father's call, Jesus, in word and deed, resisted and attempted a sort of coup, a reversal of the world's perverted value system that denies the worth of each individual. In our previous homilies, we listened to Mary's awe-inspiring announcement that her son, still in-utero, possessed as one of his central missions a call to reverse the fortunes of rich and poor, mighty and weak, oppressed and oppressor.² We watched and listened, surprised, as Jesus taught—and offended—attendees at Nazareth's synagogue by presenting them a widow and leper from enemy states as role models of faith while, at the same time, warning against the unfaithful examples of Israelite widows and lepers.³

We watched and listened, breathlessly hopeful, as Jesus stood firm against his religious leaders' considerable peer pressure to devalue and shun sinners. His willing intimacy with those labeled "publican sinners" along with his anxious service toward them made us bold in confessing, as we must, our sins so that we might partake of his generous ministrations.⁴ Finally, we joined multitudes in listening to Jesus' astonishing, gravity-defying Beatitudes in which Jesus reversed our inherited ideas concerning the nature of blessedness and woefulness.⁵

In today's homily, we enter the home of the Pharisee, Simon. With him, we watch, perhaps

² Part 1, "A Mother's Intuition: Of the Mighty and Rich, the Low and the Hungry" (Luke 1.⁴⁶⁻⁵⁵)

³ Part 2, "A Prophet's Inspiration: Of Sidonian, Syrian, and Israelite Widows and Lepers" (Luke 4.²³⁻³⁰)

⁴ Part 3, "Turning Sinners into Role Models and Heroes" (Luke 5.²⁷⁻³²)

⁵ Part 4, "The Reversal of Beatitude (Luke 6.²⁰⁻²⁶)

with some embarrassment, as Jesus generously accepts and appreciates the affectionate kisses and intimate caresses of a strange woman, a woman who is a sinner, a woman guilty of *many* sins. We wonder at his comfort, and wonder if we could ever be so secure as to care for a sinner as Jesus did—and does. We feel the earth convulse and tip under our very feet as he shatters our expectations with his announcement, “to whom little is forgiven, the same loveth little.”

We wonder, what does this mean for those of us who wish to love much?

Have you no shame?

A long, long time ago, in a life that almost seems foreign to me now, I served a proselyting mission in the American New England states. For a brief few months, my companion and I were in the habit of ending our week by stopping by an ice cream store on Saturday night as we headed home to prepared for Sunday. In an attempt, probably, to alleviate our needless guilt at such an unnecessary pleasure, we were sure to do a little proselyting with whomever served at the store’s counter, always extending an invitation for them to join us at church the following day.

So it was that one Sunday morning as I sat in a pew awaiting the beginning of services, an older female member of the ward stood at the end of my pew, whispering my name. She had a strange look on her face—something between confusion and embarrassment—as she gave me the come-hither signal with her index finger. She marched back down the aisle toward the chapel door. I followed. Entering the foyer, she pointed at a young woman—the look on the member’s face had now shifted to unambiguous disapproval—and said, “She asked for you.”

The young woman who stood in the foyer of the church asking for “Elder Burton” was one who had served my companion and me a few times at the ice cream counter. Whereas she had always dressed in one of those old style white “serving” dresses, today as she stood in the foyer, she had traded the white serving dress for a white halter top and bright red 70’s-

style hotpants. Suddenly, my heart was racing and my face flushing nearly as bright red as her hotpants.

There was no need to wonder at the time what those who stood around in the foyer thought. I could see it in their eyes, in their posture. “What is such an inappropriately dressed young woman doing standing in the foyer of our church, asking for Elder Burton, no less?”

I am ashamed to say that my sudden embarrassment was not for the young woman but for myself. I didn’t think or worry about what was being thought of her. I could only think and worry about what was being thought of me. I didn’t think of her potential embarrassment as it dawned on her that she stuck out like a sore thumb and looked unlike anyone within sight; that this was not how women dressed for Mormon religious services. I couldn’t do anything to soften her potential discomfort as I was too engrossed in my own discomfort and needs.

I don’t remember what I said or how things played out. I do know that she did not stay for services. And I do remember that my companion and I never again patronized that store to enjoy the pleasure of a couple scoops of ice cream. To this day, she remains a nameless “young woman.” A nameless young woman that I failed.

For some time (after I had gotten over my initial selfish worry of being sent home for some obscure and unspecified reason) I felt shame every Saturday night. Every Saturday night I thought of that young woman. I thought of her likely embarrassment that Sunday morning in that foyer. Every Saturday night I thought of my own embarrassment in that foyer and realized that I had then and was now thinking only of myself and never of her—oh, yes, those who “give up” two years and thousands of dollars to voluntarily serve are, so the myth goes, so unselfish.

Had I been more insightful and, more specifically, had I known the scriptures well enough to know the story recounted in today’s text, I might have thought in different terms. I might have realized that I was no Jesus. And, worse, that I was, in fact, very little like him. For Jesus, I later came to see in stories such as that found in today’s reading, had no shame. He

could have and would have been focused on the young woman, establishing and magnifying her worth in her own eyes and in the eyes of those who stood about.

But, in 1975, I felt shame at a perceived impropriety. Simon felt a similar shame in circa 33 AD. But not Jesus. Never. Jesus was in circa 33 AD, as is today in 2021 too busy thinking of the needs of others to worry about himself or what others might think of him. This is but one of the many reasons that Jesus is the unparalleled and perfect Servant and Savior.

The reader might understand my embarrassment as a missionary summoned by a young woman in halter top and hotpants, but perhaps miss the embarrassment that the woman in today's reading represented for those present in Simon's house. Perhaps we need to slow down a bit. Perhaps, as is so often the case, we need to close our eyes to consider and imagine the scene.

Who and what manner of woman

First, we must consider the matter of the unnamed woman, herself. The narrator, Luke, identifies her as an inhabitant of the unnamed city. While we do not know the city, it seems not to have been Jerusalem—Israel's only real megapolis, at least by the standards of the day. The city in which we find ourselves in this narrative is likely small. Everyone knows everyone. This woman is known. And she has a reputation.

It is the narrator that first identifies the woman as “a sinner.” He then reports that Simon knew of her reputation: “she is a sinner,” the Pharisee thought to himself. He was scandalized that Jesus, one who claimed a closeness with God such as a prophet might possess, seemed undiscerning of the woman’s reputation. The woman’s status as “sinner,” then, was no private affair. Her status as “sinner” seems to have been publicly known and acknowledged. It was likely a matter of public gossip.

Perhaps Jesus had heard the gossip. Or perhaps he possessed the sort of discernment that he

exercised in his encounter with the woman at the well—knowing more than he would be expected to know. Either way, Jesus is not ignorant of the woman’s sinfulness. He himself agrees with the narrator’s and with Simon’s assessment of the woman. She is or has been guilty of “sins,” plural. And her “sins,” Jesus states openly, are or have been “many.”

Now, we need not accept the conclusion of some that she was a prostitute. Neither is there any reason to dogmatically reject it. We simply do not know the nature of her “many” sins. But, it seems unwise to minimize her sinfulness. It seems unlikely that her sins were a matter of eating the occasional slice of bacon, eating with unwashed hands, or drinking the occasional caffeinated beverage. It seems unlikely that her sins constituted missing worship services or failing to provide the temple appropriate tithes and offerings. It seems best to see her possessing attitudes and publicly engaging in activities that could clearly and fairly be interpreted as frequent and repeated unfaithfulness toward God.

As Simon illustrates, this woman is not the type of woman with whom any self-respecting Jew would keep company. No devout follower of the Holy God would invite this sinner to any dinner party. How she even got into Simon’s house is a mystery. Who knows, perhaps this unexplained mystery was miraculous—an untold part of the story.

Caresses, too intimate

Now, we must consider the behavior in which the sinful woman engaged once she had entered Simon’s home . We really must do more than read the evangelist’s words. We must visualize them; see them with an “eye of faith.”⁶ Such seeing is akin to revelation. It is what see-ers do. Anyone can do. It just takes a little courage, a little faith, and a little imagination—a mustard seed’s worth. “Would God that all the Lord’s people were prophets.”⁷

⁶ See Ether 12.¹⁹ or Alma 5.¹⁵

⁷ Numbers 11.²⁹

What, then, do you see as the woman “began to wash” Jesus’ feet? As you seek to see with an eye of faith, keep in mind that in ancient Hebrew culture, “feet” can include everything from the tip of the toes to the knee.⁸ How do you feel as you sit in the room and watch the woman of questionable character massage Jesus’ feet, ankles, calves, etc.? How would you feel if it were your feet being so fondled? What would others think watching you be so fondled by such a dubious character?

What do you notice when you see that the cleansing agent is the woman’s tears? How close does she have to be? How close is her face to Jesus’ flesh to have the tears fall on him rather than be wasted, falling upon the divan on which he reclines or to the flood below? How often does her face touch Jesus’ legs? How often do nose, mouth, chin, cheeks, eyelids brush against his skin?

Look, now, as the woman uses her hair, an object of female beauty (think how Muslim women cover their hair in an attempt at modesty), to dry Jesus! Look at the woman’s long hair—what color is it, how thick? See how it glides over his skin. Watch it wrap and embrace his feet and legs.

But this is not the extent of this frequent sinner’s scandalous behavior. Watch! Throughout her ministrations she affectionately and appreciatively kisses Jesus’ feet. Do the kisses reach to the knee? And what do they sound like, these caressing, appreciative kisses?

I don’t know about you, but I am relieved when all she is doing is applying a lotion and massaging the lotion into his flesh! The whole thing has made me uncomfortable. In fact, I am willing to bet that you have been squirming a bit as you read this and the previous four paragraphs. I wouldn’t be surprised if you found it scandalous to simply imagine the scene. So just imagine how you would have felt to have actually witnessed the original event.

⁸ There is no word for calf. “Feet” can represent “ankle,” “calf,” etc. Some have pointed out, in fact, that “feet” can represent everything from the toes up to and including genitalia.

Then, again, add to all this the woman's questionable past.⁹ We cannot wonder at Simon's embarrassed response.

"This man, if he were a prophet, would have known who and what manner of woman this is that toucheth him: for she is a sinner."

Now comes the gravity-defying reversal

Jesus can see the embarrassment and scandal he has caused his host and dinner guests. He can see the woman's shame at being the object of such scorn. It is etched on the faces and revealed in the posture of all. Their thoughts are an open book to anyone with discernment. Jesus addresses these embarrassments and shame and begins his reversal with an illustration. A parable.

"There was a certain creditor which had two debtors: the one owed five hundred pence, and the other fifty. And when they had nothing to pay, he frankly forgave them both. Tell me therefore, which of them will love him most?"

"Simon answered and said, 'I suppose that he, to whom he forgave most.'

"And he said unto him, 'Thou hast rightly judged.'"

Now, speaking in parables might be safe. It might allow the listener to draw their own conclusions. They may or may not draw the conclusions intended by the speaker. But, on this occasion, Jesus was not interested in playing it safe. He had a definite purpose in sharing the parable. He did not wish to risk the point being missed. Therefore, Jesus makes a direct application of the parable to the present circumstances.

Simon invited Jesus to his home but had not gone out of his way to make him welcome or comfortable. He certainly had not greeted him as the woman did. Simon should not be

⁹ If she had been a prostitute, this is all the more scandalous, and insensitive on Jesus' part toward those present.

embarrassed by the woman's behavior toward Jesus, but by his own. The woman has demonstrated that she loves Jesus more than Simon. The sinner loves Jesus more than the "righteous."

We can almost hear Simon's self-justifying rejoinder. "Well, if the sinner loves God so much, why do they sin to begin with? Shouldn't the lover of God resist temptation and sin? Isn't that how one loves God? And, what are you saying, anyway? Should we sin more to love more?"

But Jesus does not address any such ludicrous questions. He knows, of course, what the Psalmist taught (and the Apostle Paul later quoted):

"The LORD looked down from heaven
upon the children of men,
to see if there were any that did understand,
and seek God.

They are all gone aside,
they are all together become filthy:
there is none that doeth good,
no, not one."¹⁰

Yes, "all have sinned and come short of the glory of God."¹¹ So, Jesus knows that Simon is no less the sinner than the woman. He knows that only the most pompously self-righteous ignores the reality that they need not intend, plan, or scheme to sin... and sin again, and again, more and more. He knows how true it is to say that temptation and sin "easily doth beset" us.¹² Sin is everywhere. It will be there to and in our dying breath.

No, Jesus leaves all that aside and lets his reversal stand. It is those who need Jesus most who

¹⁰ Psalm 14.²⁻³

¹¹ Romans 3.²³

¹² See Alma 7.¹⁵ and 2 Nephi 4.¹⁸

will make use of him most. “Confessing” sinners love Jesus more than “non-confessing” sinners—the so-called, “righteous.” And this woman, this disrespected and vulnerable woman, this disrespected and vulnerable sinner is just such a woman.

Jesus didn’t come right out and say it. But he may as well have. “Simon, if you would be truly righteous... if you would be one of my true disciples, I would have you be more like this woman, who is a sinner, whose sins are many.

Conclusion and benediction

Whether you call him “God,” “Lord,” “Elohim,” “Yahweh,” “Jesus,” or whatever else, God has a knack for championing the cause of the underdog. We could be forgiven for concluding that it is in his DNA. It is a central part of his disposition.

He began by choosing Abraham, then Isaac, then Jacob—homeless and vulnerable refugees all—as His servants. Servants who would testify of His greatness and power to all the world—a greatness and power demonstrated, in part, by his very choice of weak and vulnerable individuals as his servants. Who better to bear witness of his greatness and power than the weak and vulnerable and powerless who have participated in his greatness and power?

When God moved from calling individuals to choosing an entire nation to proclaim his greatness and power, he settled upon a pack of vulnerable and powerless Egyptian slaves. Israel was to be his ambassador to the nations of this world. On and on it went, on and on it goes... He, choosing the most unlikely candidates as ambassadors of his fame and glory and greatness and power. Paul would later marvel at God’s ingenuity in using what was thought to be unusable.

“But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise;

and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty;
and base things of the world,
and things which are despised, hath God chosen,
yea, and things which are not,
to bring to nought things that are:
That no flesh should glory in his presence....
that, according as it is written, He that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord.”¹³

So, we should not be surprised that among the many present in Simon’s home Jesus chooses a woman, who “is a sinner,” to serve as witness of God and His character to all who were in the room. We should not be surprised that among the many present in the room it is the woman, who “is a sinner,” that Jesus points to as one who can serve as exemplar for all those who were then present and for all those who would later be present, as we have been today, through the sacred text.

“You can all see for yourselves,” Jesus says. “This woman loves much. She loves much because, having sinned much she has been forgiven much. You could learn much from her.”

And how about you, dear reader. You tell me? Who do you aspire to be? Do you aspire to be Simon or the woman who was a sinner? Will you, from a distance, watch Jesus with noncommittal curiosity? Or will you kneel and weep and wash his feet as you confess the truth: that you are a sinner? Will you love much? Or little? Today is as good a time as any to choose.

*“I love the LORD,
because he hath heard my voice and my supplications.*

¹³ See 1 Corinthians 1.²⁷⁻³¹

*Because he hath inclined his ear unto me,
therefore will I call upon him as long as I live.
The sorrows of death compassed me,
and the pains of hell gat hold upon me:
I found trouble and sorrow.*

*Then called I upon the name of the LORD;
'O LORD, I beseech thee, deliver my soul.'
Gracious is the LORD, and righteous;
yea, our God is merciful.
The LORD preserveth the simple:
I was brought low, and he helped me.
Return unto thy rest, O my soul;
for the LORD hath dealt bountifully with thee.
For thou hast delivered my soul from death,
mine eyes from tears,
and my feet from falling. [”]¹⁴*

Even so, come, Lord Jesus

¹⁴ Psalm 116.1-8