



# ST BART'S

A SERMON by:

The Rev. Lynn C. Sanders, Associate Rector

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## Forgiven

*Sermon preached at the 11 a.m. service, June 16, 2013*

*The Fourth Sunday after Pentecost*

*Based on Luke 7:36-8:3*

Many years ago I was a member of St. Bart's Altar Guild. You may know that the Altar Guild is a group of folks who work quietly behind the scenes of worship services in a ministry of holy preparation, order and cleanliness. They set out all the vessels and linens and bread and wine for communion; then they take everything up after communion, washing and putting everything back to its places so it will be ready for the next time. They keep all the liturgical vessels clean and polished, all the linens clean, pressed and in good repair. I don't know how any church could function without the Altar Guild. They are so good and so faithful at what they do that all this appears to happen by magic, but I can assure you it doesn't.

One summer Sunday, much like this one, Sharon (the experienced Altar Guild person) and I (the new recruit) were scheduled to be the Altar Guild team for the 9 a.m. service (then held out on our Great Terrace). I put that on my calendar, set my clock the Saturday night before ... and woke up at 9:15am that Sunday morning.

My heart felt like it stopped as I realized I had completely missed my Altar Guild duty. I pictured the 9 a.m. service stalled, with everyone waiting for communion that never came. I pictured the clergy and others scrambling back to the sacristy to try to round up everything needed for communion, cursing me all the way. I imagined being sternly lectured, being ostracized or even drummed out of the Altar Guild as an unreliable person. (You can call my therapist later.)

Despite my strong urge to leave town, I threw on various clothes, raced in a cab to St. Bart's, and crept around the corner of Park and 50th up to the terrace wall and peered over the wall, afraid of what I might see. I heard music playing and people singing. I saw people walking up to receive communion and then walking back to their seats. Communion was set up and worship was proceeding in a completely normal way. Miraculously, things had proceeded without me. Life—and church—seemed to be going right on.

I made a beeline for Sharon after the service to confess and apologize: "Sharon, I am SO sorry. I set my clock but never heard it, woke up at 9:15. I feel terrible that I wasn't here to help set up. I apologize!" Sharon just looked at me through this tirade of apology. There was a moment's silence. And then she threw back her head and laughed out loud in honest amusement.

At that moment, Sharon's laugh said it all. No words were needed. I knew that I was forgiven.

Jesus has some words about being forgiven in this story we just heard from Luke's Gospel. It's quite a scene, isn't it, with this woman creating such a spectacle. If you're wondering how she got in, how she got past the doorman, it may help to know that this gathering was more like a symposium, taking place in a part of Simon's house that was open to the street—much like our terrace on Park Avenue. People passing by could see who was there and hear the discourse. Everyone at the table would have been reclining, with their heads toward the table and their feet away from it. It would have been easy for this woman to stand at Jesus' feet. But washing them with her tears, drying them with her hair, kissing his feet, anointing them . . . well, that's another matter.

The text says this woman is a sinner. Simon the Pharisee is quick to judge her a sinner in his own mind. How do they know she's a sinner? Is she wearing too much makeup? Frazzy hair? Is it the way she's dressed? It's usually assumed that she is a prostitute, a whore, a hooker like we might see at Port Authority bus station. But we don't really know. Maybe she broke the purity laws, which were many and strict. Maybe she didn't look after her elderly mother. Maybe she ran away from an abusive husband. We don't know.

What we do know is that that Jesus tells Simon, "Her sins, which are many, are forgiven." And we know that Jesus says to the woman, "Your sins are forgiven."

Our Bible Study group wrestled with this story this week. There was a good bit of lively discussion and questioning and humor, as there always is, thanks be to God. Then I asked the group this question: How does it feel to be forgiven?

And there was absolute silence.

Discussion eventually bubbles up about forgiving, about how hard it is to forgive someone who's hurt us, about how often it is even harder to forgive ourselves. Forgiving is closely related to being forgiven—in fact, I think they are two sides of the same coin—but I'd like to bracket "forgiving" for another sermon.

How does it feel to be forgiven?

I think the Bible Study group's reaction to my question is probably typical. Why might it be hard or uncomfortable for us to talk about being forgiven? What makes it hard to us to hear—really hear in the core of our being—these words: "Your sins are forgiven" ?

We may think, "Well ... I haven't killed anybody, I haven't stolen anything, I haven't cheated on my spouse, I come to church most Sundays ... what do I need to be forgiven for?"

Or, we may think, "I've done something so terrible that I could never be forgiven."

I wonder how Simon the Pharisee would have reacted if Jesus had turned to him and said, "Simon, your sins are forgiven."

This unnamed woman, this sinner, knows her sins only too well. Maybe that's why she is able to hear—to really hear deeply, like the earth hears the rain—"Your sins are forgiven."

Being forgiven opens a way forward. When we feel forgiven, we are no longer bound by whatever it is we have done (or not done). We are freed to move forward in some new way.

I've been thinking a lot about this this week: How can we forgive unless we first realize that we have been forgiven? I'm not sure we can.

There is a story—perhaps you've heard it. A couple has been married for several years. The stresses of life accumulate, as they do, and they go through a long dry spell. Out of frustration, one of them has an affair. When that's discovered, they separate, their marriage in shambles. They try couples counseling, but there is a stalemate. Finally, the counselor tells them, "You've got two weeks. Each of you think really hard about whether you can and want to put this behind you. If you can commit to doing that—meaning you will never bring this up again, ever, and you agree to a new start, to move forward as though this never happened—then meet on the Brooklyn Bridge at noon exactly two weeks from today. If you can't commit to doing this, then don't show up." Two weeks go by. They search their souls, struggling to decide what they really want to do and are able to do. Each wonders what the other will do, what will be the fate of their marriage, their lives. At noon on the appointed day, each one finds the other on the Brooklyn Bridge. They begin anew. A new way forward has opened up for them.

This unnamed woman weeping at Jesus' feet has somehow been able to acknowledge her sins, whatever they are. She has been able to hear, really hear, that her sins are forgiven, and this has opened up a new way of seeing and understanding herself. I think it is in profound gratitude that she weeps at Jesus' feet, giving him the only things she has to give—her tears, her hair, her bit of ointment.

Jesus also says to this woman, "Your faith has saved you. Go in peace." What faith is that? I don't think it's a faith that depends on knowing the right doctrines or holding a certain set of beliefs. Maybe her faith is one of knowing, believing, trusting, accepting God's love and forgiveness, giving her heart to this one who has forgiven her sins.

Maybe Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Susanna heard, really heard those words, too. Maybe that's what made them go with Jesus and the twelve throughout the country, helping to spread the good news of God. Maybe a new way opened for them, too.

With some trepidation, I am going to ask you to try something:

Turn to the person next to you and say simply, "Your sins are forgiven." Not with a question mark, not with a laugh, but say simply, warmly: "Your sins are forgiven."

How does it feel to hear those words?

Your sins are forgiven.

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