



Luke 7:36-50
Not Famous, But Known
“Known By Her Love”

Rev. Brian North
November 16th, 2025

This is the third in a four-Sunday series looking at some people Jesus ministers to or elevates as examples of faith and discipleship who are not famous, but are known by him. The sermon series title, as I mentioned the first Sunday, is the slogan of a chain of bagel shops in New York City called “Pop Up Bagels” that our daughter Hailey introduced us to when our family went there for her college graduation this last May.

In honor of that, today in our fellowship time down in the gym, part of the food to snack on will be bagels and cream cheese. I wish I could tell you these were overnighted from “Pop Up Bagels” and delivered fresh to us this morning by Uber Eats. (If Oprah Winfrey can have Ezell’s chicken brought to her in Chicago, certainly we can get bagels and cream cheese from New York City, right?) But I think today’s bagels came from Costco. Costco *does* have pumpkin spice bagels right now and I know Betty got some of them for today, and they are delicious. Maybe even divine! So after worship, as you visit the Ministry Fair and we have a time of fellowship together in the gym, you can have a pumpkin spice bagel. You’ll thank me later. Ok, let’s get this train back on the tracks with a word of prayer...

Today we are in Luke 7 beginning in verse 36. We’ll take the passage in three readings today, starting with the first 5 verses, and then we’ll continue with more in a few minutes. This is the word of the Lord to you and me today, starting with **Luke 7:36-40**.

So, if you’re familiar with the relationship between Jesus and the Pharisees, it might surprise you to read in verse 36 that Jesus was at the home of a Pharisee named Simon. **It’s not that we’re surprised by Jesus; it’s Simon’s invitation that is surprising.** Jesus was willing to meet with anyone, and that’s still true today. The surprise here is that Simon would have Jesus over, because there was a fair amount of animosity from the Pharisees toward Jesus that grew over time and led to his crucifixion. We saw that testiness on full display last week in the passage we looked at near the end of Jesus’ life in Luke 21.

So: **Why would Simon invite him?** We don't know for certain, but there are a few possibilities. Maybe Simon had a genuine interest in Jesus. Maybe, as a Pharisee—one of the guardians of religious life—he wanted to test or evaluate Jesus' orthodoxy. Maybe it was pride, knowing that inviting Jesus would draw a large crowd and elevate his own status. Earlier in Luke, Jesus has already filled homes and drawn large gatherings.

Then a woman—whose name we never learn—enters the gathering. She wets Jesus' feet with her tears, wipes them with her hair, and pours perfume on his feet. We'll learn in a moment that Simon didn't offer Jesus the customary hospitality of providing water for his feet. This woman takes on that role instead.

But we might wonder who she is and what she's about. Some have suggested she's Mary Magdalene, but Luke introduces her by name later, and she doesn't match this story. Some have suggested she's Mary of Bethany and that this is the same event that John 12 tells of. There are some similarities, but the differences in the two events are too great for this to be one and the same.

Simon seems to know a little something about her. In verse 39 he says to himself, **“If this man [Jesus] were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is—that she is a sinner” (7:39).** To Simon, and perhaps others around the table, her actions are scandalous, and Jesus allowing them is scandalous, too. Many people have presumed her sin was prostitution. But nothing in the text actually confirms that.

She also seems to be an uninvited guest. How could this happen? One factor is that gatherings at people's homes like this were often semi-public events, especially at the homes of people who were pretty well-off – which was generally the case of Pharisees like Simon. The passage we looked at a couple weeks ago, where a packed house required entry through the roof shows how these events often worked.

Another odd thing is that she got to his feet so easily. **At a meal like this, the invited guests would be at the table, laying on their side on a “backless couch,” head close to the table and feet pointed away.** They leaned on one elbow and ate with the other hand, using foods that were easy to handle—perhaps not bagels and cream cheese like today, but you get the idea. Meanwhile, other townspeople could enter and stand behind the guests, near their feet.

This all seems odd to us, but it was normal for them. There’s a parable Jesus teaches where the guests of a wedding banquet all make excuses at the last minute for why they can’t come, and the host sends his servant out into the “highways and byways” to invite whoever can make it. That seems a bit odd to us as well, but this is their culture and helps us understand today’s passage where you’ve got a mixture of invited and uninvited guests at a dinner party.

Because guests reclined with their feet away from the table, the woman could easily approach Jesus’ feet. That’s why the text tells us in verse 38 that she stood “behind” Jesus as she cleansed his feet and put the perfume on them. Simon is shocked. He mocks Jesus with this thought that “if this man were a prophet...” he’d know better than to let her do this to him; but then Jesus demonstrates prophetic insight by responding not just to what Simon said, but to what Simon thought. Jesus has something he wants to say to Simon. Simon invites him to share. So, let’s continue reading, starting in **verse 41... (41-43)**

Jesus tells a parable. **It was the norm in their day to tell riddles and stories at dinner parties such as this.** So, Jesus is right in line with their customs. The parable is pretty straight-forward, and Simon gets it. Many of Jesus’ parables require him to explain them. This is not one of them. The one with the larger debt forgiven is going to be the one who will be most grateful and full of love toward the one who did the forgiving.

If my bank calls me tomorrow and says, “Brian, we’ve decided that you don’t need to pay off the rest of your mortgage. It’s all forgiven and you now own your house free and clear.” I’d be a really happy guy. That would be awesome. If they were to do that 12 ½ years ago just after I bought the

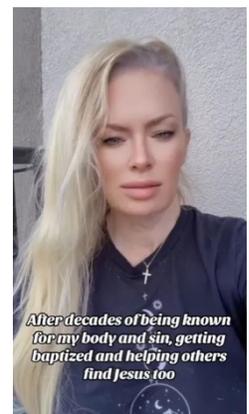
house, I'd be even happier. I would love them even more. If they did that for someone buying a house today, especially with a typical 20% down payment on the house, their gratitude would be enormous. Their love for the mortgage company would be off the charts. So, we get the point – much forgiven leads to much love. Let's see how Jesus applies it to the situation at hand, as we finish out the passage (v. 44-50).

Here's the heart of the gospel, the good news: **Forgiveness is the great equalizer in the kingdom of God, because we all need it.** We're all on a level playing field, all impacted by and struggling with sin, all separated from God because of it. But God's forgiveness in Jesus Christ puts us all on equal footing and leaves no room for judgement. Simon clearly struggled with that – his response to the woman is prideful and divisive, but he doesn't know her whole story. He got the first century version of a social media post that doesn't give any context, and then he drew a harsh judgment rather than a gracious one.

Jesus is teaching that we're all sinners in need of God's grace and when we truly know the depth of our forgiveness, our natural response is one of great love—love for God and love for others. We are forgiven and need not be bound by our previous sins. Our sins need not hold us back. They need not dictate our future, and we are all in the same boat.

Now, her actions aren't earning forgiveness, because forgiveness can't be earned. It's all grace – unearned and unmerited. As Jesus says in verse 47, **“Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—as her great love has shown” (7:47).** Her love for Jesus shows the forgiveness she's received. It is the *fruit* of the forgiveness she's received. She's been transformed from the inside out and this is just the visible sign of her new life in Christ.

This last week a headline ran widely—from the New York Post to KOMO news here in Seattle—announcing that Jenna Jameson is now a follower of Jesus. The headline that ran in most news outlets including locally read, “Former adult star Jenna Jameson is helping people ‘find Jesus’ after being



known for ‘sin’.” On an Instagram video post, she wrote **(Photo)**, “After decades of being known for my body and sin, getting baptized and helping others find Jesus too.”

It’s a modern-day example of someone with a publicly known sinful past who’s experienced the forgiveness of God through confession and trusting Jesus. And I can imagine some people responding with thoughts similar to Simon’s in our passage: “If Jesus *really* knew what kind of woman she was...” “If that church or that pastor *really* knew the sins of her past...” But what matters is the love for Jesus that flows from forgiveness.

We show that love in a variety of ways. Scripture tells us to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength and to love our neighbor as ourselves. Those two commands summarize the 10 commandments. Jesus also says that if we love him, we’ll obey his commands. Jesus says that by our love for one another, people will know that we are his disciples. I think the woman here in Luke 7 makes it clear that she’s a disciple of Jesus. **She has great love, and it’s all because she realizes the depth of her sin and the even greater depth of God’s forgiveness through Jesus Christ.**

Like last week, Jesus highlights a nameless woman as an example of faith and what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. Last week it was an unseen, poor widow who gave more generously than all the others. Today it’s a woman who has a reputation as a sinner. Scripture is full of people who sinned big but experienced God’s forgiveness and went on to love God and love others deeply: Jacob, King David, Jonah, Rahab, the entire nation of Israel, Peter, Paul, Zacchaeus, the thief on the cross next to Jesus...the list goes on.

And maybe this woman in Luke 7, and these other stories of great forgiveness, surprise some of us. Maybe you once had a reputation that wasn’t very positive, and when you received the forgiveness of Jesus and began to follow Jesus, perhaps that was a surprise. Or maybe for some it’s a present-day thing. Being in church, listening to a sermon, singing or at least listening to the worship songs...maybe that’s a surprise to you, or to others in your life. This might be all very new to you, but you’re in the right place to grow in faith as we lead each other toward Jesus.

Wherever you are on that journey, the call is the same: let your love for Jesus overflow into your daily life, as it did for this woman here. For those of us who have followed Jesus for many years, if it would surprise our neighbors or our co-workers that we are Christians, then we've got some work to do. I regularly remind my family and the church staff that yes, I'm a Christian. 😊 If you're brand new to the faith, then there's grace. You're still figuring things out – and often a new believer is the best witness to the transformative forgiveness of Jesus. But most of us have been disciples for several years, even several decades: Does our love radiate outward the way this woman's love radiates in this passage?

You and I have been forgiven much. Even if you haven't committed what society labels a "big sin", every sin breaks relationship with God. Every sin is why Jesus became human, lived a sinless life, offered himself as the perfect sacrifice on the cross to atone for our sins, and was raised up from the grave to give us hope for eternal life. In God's eyes, every sin has the same impact on our relationship with him. That's the reality that each of us must recognize.

But the Good News is that God has done something about it. **Through Jesus, God forgives it all. He forgives me, and he forgives you.** When we acknowledge our sin, trust Jesus, and receive his grace, we are forgiven. So, in response, let's live lives that are marked by a generous outpouring of love—just as we see in this passage, and just as God has shown us in Jesus. Let's pray...Amen.