

Gospel Meditation: Luke 7:36-50

Individually or as a group, watch the Lenten devotional video and work through the following meditation.

44 Then he turned toward the woman and said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. 45 You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. 46 You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet. 47 Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—as her great love has shown. But whoever has been forgiven little loves little" (vv. 44-47)

REFLECT—*Sink into this passage for the next seven days using the following prompts:*

- Find a comfortable place and empty your mind of its many thoughts.
 - Who do you identify with in this story? Attempt a little role-playing in your imagination:
 - *Woman* – what is it like to squat down and wash Jesus' feet when you've been alienated by shame?
 - *Disciples* – how does this story violate your personal space? What would your first impressions be of this scene?
 - *Pharisee* – how would this disrupt your dinner plans? What would be your response to such a disruption?
 - *Jesus* – how is this a story of his radical humility? What if a stranger came up to you and wanted to wash your feet?

REPENT—*Take next steps to change your mind and behavior through the following prompts:*

- Imagine that you are the "sinful woman" in this story.
 - Let the places of deep shame, hurt and woundedness come to mind.
 - Be conscious of what you're feeling in this moment.
 - How would you feel being labeled a "sinful woman"?
 - What does this jar of perfume represent in your life?
- Look into the eyes of Jesus as you kneel at his feet while he reclines to eat.
 - What do the feet of Jesus feel like? What does the perfume smell like?
 - Describe the facial expression of Jesus. What do his eyes tell you?
 - What is he asking from you?

PRAY—*Be embraced by the friendship of the crucified God.*

My loving Lord Jesus, as you hung upon the Cross, your deepest desire was the salvation of the world. From your Cross, you look down upon me, a lowly sinner, and invite me into your body called the church. Amen.

"What is Jesus doing in his last moments? He's caring for Mary. Even helpless on the cross he is caring for her. Jesus understood both the love of a parent and love for a parent."

-James Martin, SJ, *Seven Last Words: An Invitation to Deeper Friendship with Jesus*

VIDEO TRANSCRIPT

“When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to her, ‘Woman, here is your son,’ and to the disciple, ‘Here is your mother.’ From that time on, this disciple took her into his home.” (John 19:26-27)

The pine branches kept hitting me. A mixture of tears, sweat and pine sap covered my face. I had to get home. Just five minutes earlier, my father had looked at me and screamed that I was an “f up” (except he used the real word). Such words should never be heard by a boy from his father. In confusion and heartbreak, I grabbed my bag and ran out the door.

My father and mother divorced when I was two years old. When I was five, I began visiting him every other weekend. He struggled to hold down a job and bounced around from family members and various girlfriends with whom he lived. Like a romantic vagabond, his life was a nomadic pilgrimage for lost love. Home always seemed to elude him. And into this unsettled world, every other weekend, he attempted to invite his only son.

My mother and stepfather lived only one street over from where my father was living with his sister. The small town of Grottoes, Virginia, in which we all resided, is laid out like a grid. Straight streets each dead-end into a creek that meanders through the center of town. Each street is peppered with almost identical FHA homes that all have backyards that create alleyways that perforate the grid. The alleyway that separated 19th street, where I lived, and 18th street, where my father was staying, was an intricate web of chain-link fences and tree lines. As a kid, I could turn left at the alley and be in the backyard of my mother’s sister. If I turned right, I would trek through the pine tree forest, really just a line of white pines, and come out in the front yard of the house in which my father was living.

The house in which my father was staying was a small ranch in a constant state of disrepair. Inside, my aunt, who was constantly battling depression and prescription drug addiction, offered very little attention to cleanliness or hygiene. The home smelled like cat urine and a big pit-bull named Dublin. Dublin, or “Dubby,” as we called her, was my closest friend in the house. While people feared her because of her breed, she was always the sweetest and kindest companion to me. She had hopped off my lap that fateful day to go outside and I saw the time as an opportunity to do something nice for my father who seemed to forever be locked in his bedroom. Locked away from me. Our weekend visits felt little like a dad and son spending time together. Instead, it seemed that my presence merely assuaged the guilt that he never saw me and that he should *want* to see me.

What happened next reveals how trauma and tragedy have a way of clouding our memory. Those who have experienced crisis realize that the brain is hardwired to help us move on past the events that hurt us. Emotional pain, however, creates scars that serve as deep ravines in our souls. We construct makeshift bridges to get over these holes in our emotional landscape. Then, not surprisingly, we begin to wear down the ground of our souls into well-worn ruts. We dare not step off these beaten paths. For when we do, we realize that our brains have been lying to us all along. Our interiority is not as safe or calm as we’ve been led to believe.

The events that led up to those tragic words from my father are as cloudy as they’ve ever been. In all honesty, I sometimes ask myself, did the whole thing ever really happen? The veracity of the moment comes in the emotional pain that emerges as I ponder that dreaded day. What my memory tells me to convey to you is that I was about eight years old, I was attempting to make coffee, I dropped the carafe

on the ground, it made a loud noise, my father appeared, and he spoke the biggest lie of my life over me. He didn't do it because he's a bad guy. I can tell you that my father does love me. You see, we think that the binaries in which we learn to think, *either* this *or* that, will somehow save us from pain. The truth is that the line of good and evil runs right down the center of us all. The pain comes in those crisis moments when something or someone we love speaks or does something that introduces tragedy into our lives.

By the time we get to the cross, the disciples, like me, have all run away. That is, all of them except Mary and John. They are prominent in our Gospel text. In this story, Mary is both the mother of Jesus AND a part of the new creation in him. The one born of her body is the one born to be sacrificed. Through Mary we are invited into the darkness of the cross. Through Mary and John, we witness the formation of the church.

And in his moment of deepest agony, Jesus tenderly provides for his mother. It is probable that Joseph, her husband, was long since dead, and that her son, Jesus, had supported her. Now that he was dying what would become of her? He saw her standing by and knew her cares and griefs, and he saw John standing not far off. So, he established a new relationship between his beloved mother and his beloved disciple. He says to her, "Woman, behold your son," for whom, from now on, you must have a motherly affection. And to John, "Behold your mother," to whom you must pay a sonly duty. From that hour, that hour never to be forgotten, John took Mary, the mother of Jesus, into his own home.

Notice the care Christ took of his mother. He was not so much taken up with a sense of his own sufferings as to forget those closest to him. His mother, perhaps, was so taken up with his sufferings that she didn't think of what would become of her, but Jesus did.

He calls her *woman*, not *mother*, not out of any disrespect to her, but because *mother* would have been a cutting word to her who was already wounded with grief. He directs her to look upon John as her son.

This was an honor put upon John, and a testimony to his friendship with Jesus. It was also a great responsibility for John yet he took her to his own home. Church history tells us that Mary lived with John at Jerusalem for eleven years and then died. Therefore, the word of Jesus to his mother from the cross is a great encouragement to our faith. For if he could provide for his own mother in the moment of his greatest weakness and humiliation, how much more can he meet all our needs today? Jesus' word to his mother encourages our faith in that it illustrates for us the benefits of the church, the body of Christ. Notice that contrary to custom and expectation, Jesus did not admonish his own brothers to care for their mother. Whatever the reason for not putting Mary in the care of her other sons, the new relationship between Mary and John illustrates for us the provision made for us in the body of Christ.

When Jesus says to Mary, "Look on John as your son," and to John, "Look on Mary as your mother," he is showing us how our needs are to be met when we have left everything to follow him. One of the gifts Jesus gave to us from the cross was the church: a loving, caring, sustaining, encouraging family beyond family. And it is a great encouragement to our faith that he illustrates the meaning of the church the way he did in the relationship between John and Mary.

Woman, behold your son. Son, behold your mother. Church, behold the tender embrace of God.

This past fall, I spent a week on silent retreat at the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky. As often happens when we quarantine ourselves from the din of the world, we find an inner invitation to a person who longs for us to hear his voice. Jesus invited me to recount that day I started to run. My heart rate went up again. I started to sweat again. My eyes got watery again. I ran the gauntlet again in my memories. The pine branches hit my face. The alley way gave way to the well-worn path between the chain link fences. Then, in front of me, was a man.

His presence both startled and welcomed me. I both wanted to run past him and run to him. I approached him hesitantly. Now the surrealness of this moment is that this was all occurring in a memory within a memory. Physically I was sitting in my room in the Abbey. Spiritually, mystically, I was between those fences.

I approached the man cautiously. His arms opened up and I collapsed into his embrace. Tears poured down my eight-year-old, or 36-year-old cheeks. The moment had me suspended over several decades simultaneously. I cried out. Why had my father said those things to me? Where did I belong? Why was I ever born? The embrace seemed to squeeze out the deep questions that have haunted my life. He took them on himself. He held me through it. Finally, the questions exhausted themselves and I just cried into his chest.

I remember sitting in my room at the Abbey and feeling his head rest on top of my head. He then patted me on my head and whispered my true identity into my ear, "You are the apple of my eye. I'm so proud of you." The psalmist declares that "deep calls to deep in the roar of your waterfalls; all your waves and breakers have swept over me" (42:7). I felt the Lord's tenderness and compassion for me. "Jason, behold your saving Lord." "Saving Lord, behold your son." The weight of his embrace lightened my burden. He patted me on my head and sent me along. I remember smelling my grandfather's cologne as I walked away. It lingered on my clothes. I adored my grandfather and that smell marks security to me. I felt secure...I could move on. The invitation to leave the alley was given to me. So, let us all take courage in the care and power and provision of our Lord. If he was eager to care for his mother, how much more eager will he be today to care for you! If Jesus could provide for the needs of his own, in the moment of his greatest weakness and humiliation, how much more can he provide for your need? And if Jesus purchased the church with his own blood and ordained that in it bereft mothers find sons and sons find mothers, then no one should be without a caring family today in the body of Christ. Church, behold your saving Lord. Saving Lord, behold your church. In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, amen.