**SERMON SERIES: WILD, WICKED, AND WONDERFUL WOMEN OF THE BIBLE**

 **“The Woman Who Teaches Us To Worship”**

***Luke 7:36-50***

*36One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to have dinner with him, so Jesus went to his home and sat down to eat. 37When a certain immoral woman from that city heard he was eating there, she brought a beautiful alabaster jar filled with expensive perfume. 38Then she knelt behind him at his feet, weeping. Her tears fell on his feet, and she wiped them off with her hair. Then she kept kissing his feet and putting perfume on them.*

*39When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, “If this man were a prophet, he would know what kind of woman is touching him. She’s a sinner!”*

*40Then Jesus answered his thoughts. “Simon,” he said to the Pharisee, “I have something to say to you.”*

*“Go ahead, Teacher,” Simon replied.*

*41Then Jesus told him this story: “A man loaned money to two people—500 pieces of silver to one and 50 pieces to the other. 42But neither of them could repay him, so he kindly forgave them both, canceling their debts. Who do you suppose loved him more after that?”*

*43Simon answered, “I suppose the one for whom he canceled the larger debt.”*

*“That’s right,” Jesus said. 44Then he turned to the woman and said to Simon, “Look at this woman kneeling here. When I entered your home, you didn’t offer me water to wash the dust from my feet, but she has washed them with her tears and wiped them with her hair. 45You didn’t greet me with a kiss, but from the time I first came in, she has not stopped kissing my feet. 46You neglected the courtesy of olive oil to anoint my head, but she has anointed my feet with rare perfume.*

*47“I tell you, her sins—and they are many—have been forgiven, so she has shown me much love. But a person who is forgiven little shows only little love.” 48Then Jesus said to the woman, “Your sins are forgiven.”*

*49The men at the table said among themselves, “Who is this man, that he goes around forgiving sins?” 50And Jesus said to the woman, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.”*

 Every step was torturous. Her legs felt as if they were encased in stone. Her back felt scorched by the baleful eyes following her. She quivered in fear, her stomach knotted tightly, her cheeks tingling from shame and disgrace. She didn’t dare look around for fear of crumbling beneath the hateful stares. She kept her eyes fixed on one person: Jesus.

 She had seen lots of men. She had looked at some merely as a way to put food on the table. Some she had seen with something she might at one time have called love. But in all of them she had seen the same thing at one time or another: lust, power, and judgment. She was beneath them, an object of gratification, someone to temporarily control. So she had learned how to survive. She didn’t really live. She just survived.

 She saw him watching her, and his expression—*his eyes*—caused her heart to skip. He wasn’t looking at her the way other men did. As she searched his gentle face, she saw no lust. No yearning for power. And no judgment. It was as if he could see her for who she really was. A real person. Someone—*dare she even think it*—of worth and value?

 Tears stung her eyes. She clutched the delicate jar of perfume tighter to keep from dropping it. The tears crept down her cheeks and a sob escaped her throat.

 She ran the final few steps to where Jesus reclined at the table. She half-knelt, half-fell at his feet, as if her legs refused to hold her up any longer. The tears dropped from her chin. The first one hit Jesus on the ankle, the second on the foot. Then a third and fourth. She sobbed hard, her body shaking with emotion. She didn’t dare look at him. *What if he sent her away? What if he didn’t care about her at all*? These questions bit into her heart like a ravenous jackal, prompting a fresh flow of tears.

 *Would he forgive her after all she’d done? Was she even worthy to ask for forgiveness?* Her sobbing had ceased, replaced by gentle, soft weeping. Her throat was raw and her body ached from the exertion. As she wiped her eyes she saw the tears on Jesus’ feet. They had left tiny trails through the dust on them. Without thinking she reached up and removed the silver pin that held up her long, black hair. It cascaded down around her shoulders.

 The dinner patrons gasped and the murmuring became horrific expressions of dismay and disgust. Then it hit her what she had just done: not only had she entered a private dinner party uninvited; she had also let her hair down in public, in front of men who were not her husband *(as if she had a husband to worry about).* She risked a glance up at Jesus, tensing herself for the inevitable rebuke.

 But it didn’t come. Instead there was just the simple smile that offered love. Acceptance. And yes, she knew it—*knew it in her heart!—*forgiveness! Opening the jar of perfume, she spread it over Jesus’ feet and used her silken hair to massage it in. The aroma spread, strong yet delicate. She leaned down and kissed the feet as she continued to clean them. The mutterings had grown into protests of indignation, but now she really didn’t care. What they said didn’t matter. What they thought didn’t matter. Only Jesus mattered. Only the one who had forgiven her and accepted her adoration mattered. She gently placed her head against Jesus’ leg, calm and secure in the midst of the angry storm, and for the first time she knew peace.

 ***Often the very wealthy would hold dinner parties in lush gardens outside their homes. These gardens commonly had several barred gates, and people—particularly the poor—would gather around these gates. They could see who was eating, and there was also the hope that scraps might be available after the meal. It’s probable that this woman was among such a crowd.***

 And who would think that such a person could teach us anything about worship. Isn’t worship supposed to be put together and led by professionals? Isn’t it something only the trained can do? And yet if we explore her story more closely, we discover the answer to these questions is NO.

**This woman teaches us that worship does one thing: it exalts God in Jesus above all else.** She wasn’t putting on a show, taking a dare, or looking for a handout. She was willing to go against the social expectations and norms of the day; to risk ridicule and embarrassment. We need to have that kind of focus and determination when we enter God’s presence in worship.

 Too often our focus in worship is not on God, but on countless other things. Maybe it’s the pastor or the choir. Maybe it’s what so-and-so is wearing. Maybe it’s something that got left out of the bulletin. Maybe it’s a change in the order of service. We’re surrounded by many things which vie for our attention, even in church.

The acts of worship are not easy. It is not designed to be something we just sit through and let be done “to us” or done “for us.” Each of us is called—and expected--to offer our greatest adoration and praise to God. And that requires effort, commitment, and intentionality on our part.

As worshipers, we also find ourselves constrained by fear. We fear coming to the altar because of what someone might think. We don’t lift our hands, say AMEN! or show our joy because we’ve been told it’s not proper. Not everyone may want to express their worship in these ways, and that’s fine. But we should not be limited in our worship because someone else isn’t doing it, or might say something if we do it.

***In a previous appointment I served, there was a young girl with a fabulous voice. She loved to share her gift in worship. Often, while singing, she would sway back and forth or raise her hand. One Sunday I was told by an older member of that congregation that this girl “needed to stop doing all that dancing! This isn’t a Pentecostal church!” How tragic. That elderly lady believed there was only one way to worship: her way. And everyone should do it just like she did. Anything else she considered improper.***

When we study this unnamed woman in our Scripture reading, we realize that nothing she did was proper! Her only desire was to be with Jesus. I pray our desire to be with Jesus is stronger than our desire to please other people or to be comfortable. In worship, we should come looking for Jesus, just as this woman did.

 But the woman’s desire for forgiveness didn’t stop at barging in and disrupting the soup and salad. She went to Jesus and touched him. And even more appalling in that time, she let her hair down in public! Again, nothing she did was considered “proper” in her culture.

 This woman was a known sinner. As such, she had no standing, no honor, in society. She was treated with contempt and revulsion. So really, what did she have to lose by her unpredictable actions? But we shy away from loving Jesus with fierce and visible passion because we have a lot to lose, don’t we? Again, we’re afraid of what people will say or think; we have our reputations to think about. Yet Jesus loves unpredictable, irrational responses to his grace.

***In the first church I served, during a time of praise and worship one Sunday morning, one woman left her seat and came to the front. She knelt at the altar and raised her arms in praise. From my vantage point I could see the congregation almost visibly recoiling in discomfort. Her act of unconstrained worship made that very traditional congregation uncomfortable because nobody—*nobody*—ever expressed their worship that way. Afterward I heard that many people assumed the woman was just having another “mental episode.” But I had watched her as she knelt and worshiped, and I knew she was loving Jesus with everything she had.***

 That woman in my first church, and the woman in our Scripture reading, proves that there is no right or wrong way to worship God. Jesus said in John 4:23-24, *“The Father is looking for anyone who will worship him in spirit and truth.”* If we come into God’s presence in spirit and truth, we can worship in many different ways. For some, sitting in quiet reverence is their best worship. For some, raising their hands or clapping expresses their worship. Some sway, some dance, some kneel, some lay face down on the floor. All are acceptable if the heart is focused on God.

 ***When Felicia and I visited Ghana we were amazed, blessed, and put to shame by their worship! When we have guests in our buildings, we can sometimes try to impress them by putting on the best “worship show” we can. We want to look good. The people in Ghana didn’t put on a show for the visiting Americans. They worshiped in their own way, with passion and energy, and without worrying about what we might think. As a result, it was very easy for all of us to enter into the spirit of worship with them because we knew it was not about performance, good impressions, or people-pleasing. It was about glorifying God.***

 When we worship, we are drawn closer to God. The more we worship, the closer we are drawn. And the closer we get to our holy God, the more our sins are exposed. We can’t worship God honestly and authentically without recognizing our own sinfulness and without being repentant. Of course, that could be an excuse for just going through the motions: we don’t want to face up to what needs fixing in our lives. True worship lays us bare before our Creator and surrenders everything to him.

 Satan doesn’t want us to worship. He knows what it’s like to worship God—after all, he did it once long ago before he rebelled and was cast down. He knows the joy, the healing, the power worship has. And he doesn’t want you and I to experience that. So he causes us to turn worship into a duty, a routine, something boring, something to fight about.

 ***This summer we’re going to invest a little more time talking about and exploring worship. We’ll be looking at some psalms about worship, and we’ll talk about the order and structure of worship, the music of worship, and the need for worship.***

As we prepare for a few moments of silent reflection, ask God where he sees you in our Scripture reading. Does he see me sitting around the table, passing judgment, and thinking myself spiritually superior? Or does he see me kneeling at the feet of Jesus, weeping because of my brokenness and guilt, doing whatever it takes to show my love for him?

Let us pray in silence…