

Anointed, Saved, Forgiven  
Luke 7:36 – 8:3  
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Technically speaking to anoint something is to rub it with oil as a sacred rite or as a ritual for consecration. "Smearing something with oil" is more than a little troublesome these days as a huge chunk of our nation is being smeared with oil right now - but you can still get the point.

Anoint can also mean to set apart as if by divine election. If you fiddle around on the internet or listen to much Christian radio you might hear the phrase, "anointed ministry" which seems in its terminology to want to claim an anointing in the Spirit -- claiming that God has set them apart by the Holy Spirit's blessing, the Holy Spirit's anointing. A while back we had a member leave our church because the church he had found was "truly anointed." I gave him a hug and prayed him well on his journey – thinking that the hug and the prayer were the best anointings I could offer him in that moment through rejection.

Years ago I was asked by a young couple to come and anoint their home, their new house. I told them I had done a house blessing before, but never a house anointing. They told me that the house had a negative spiritual energy, they were afraid of its negative vibe and of its dark past and they needed it doubly blessed, with prayer and oil. So I called three of my mentors, all older Presbyterian pastors. I got a mixed reaction from the mentors: one of the most trusted said, "I'd think twice before I got involved in something that sounds like a basket of hokum – that is not exactly the most Presbyterian of requests." Granted, he was right. Another, the most pastoral of those called said, "Do what feels right to you – it's your calling, their request. If it'll help them, then I can't see much harm in it -- after all sometimes we anoint the dying and sometimes we anoint new babies and pray blesses, so I can't see much harm in a house." And so I called the unique of my mentors, the guy who plays guitar in the pulpit and who thinks waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaay outside of the box – in fact, I doubt he even has a box – and he said, "Cool. Really cool. I've done that lots of times -- here's what you do."

I finally decided to do it – mostly because I think there are some powerful biblical referents for it. In thinking of anointing a doorpost with oil once thinks of the story of Moses as the Israelites anointed their doorposts with Lamb's blood in the great event of the Passover. Or one thinks of the high command of the Shema found in Deuteronomy 6 – shema va'Israel – hear O Israel, the Lord is your God and you shall love God with all your soul, might, and mind, and you shall recite these words over your children and you shall write these words over your doorposts. Our Youth in NYC last summer were amazed to the little Hebrew letter sheen – the sh sound, the first sound in this command from Deuteronomy affixed over doorposts, just as Moses had commanded. Sometimes, yes even here in Tarboro you find them in homes, homes or apartments where there has ever

been a Jewish family. They are indicative of anointing and protection of God through the power of God's word.

So I wonder today -- Have you ever been anointed? Have you ever been consecrated for something? Set apart by prayer, or oil, or some other means?

It turns out that there are many stories of anointing in the Bible -- the most intimate use of anoint occurs here in Luke 7 a place where God doesn't anoint us so much as we, represented by a nameless woman desperate for God's grace, anoint God. Imagine that, imagine this: an unnamed woman anointing Jesus with perfume and tears and sacred kisses after she sneaks up behind him at a party, wasting an alabaster jar -- meaning whatever was in it was highly expensive, one of those fragrances they keep waaay behind the counter at the Belk-Hudson store. And she does the unthinkable -- she anoints Jesus' feet. Anointing was for the head. Feet were dirty, dirty -- think sandals and desert and dust and dirt. And yet this is here action. It is stark, it is direct, and it is her act of love.

It causes confusion, her action. Why would Jesus accept the anointing from one so sinful? (Can't you just hear the whispers in the crowd?)

It raises questions for us: Does God need our anointing? We certainly need God's anointing and blessing in our lives, yes?

Don't miss (if you read the Luke text) the ridicule of the scholars, the scribes, the disciples -- near everyone. Her exuberance over Jesus is over the top and makes everyone uncomfortable. Her anointing of Jesus is a lavish act of love as far as I can tell. She is greatest in need of Jesus, from everyone at the party, because she is gravest in sin. So she sneaks up behind Jesus (remember, they lay down to eat a great feast -- no dinner tables, no place settings) and washes his feet, and anoints them with perfume and tears.

"You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment," says Jesus at Luke 7: 46. "Therefore I tell you her sins are forgiven."

Think about that. It should make you pause. Something very important is happening here. If we study her actions in the presence of Jesus, and Jesus' pronouncement we can learn something about the transaction of grace itself.

She anoints. She is forgiven.

Did she earn her forgiveness? Did she merit her grace? (Note: that phrase is itself an oxymoron).

Of course not. Think about the parable that is at the heart of this passage, the part of the passage about the creditor with two debtors, one who owes 50 and the other 500. Jesus tells it in the midst of the woman's story and just preceding her

exoneration. Note this, my friends – neither of the debtors does anything to earn the elimination of their debt, the money lender, the creditor just takes it away. “Which of the debtors is most grateful?” Jesus asks. Well, in the parable, the person who has the greatest debt forgiven is the one who is most grateful for forgiveness. In our lives sometimes the same is true – often is it those who have done the greatest harm who understand grace the best. Those who know they need to be forgiven are the most grateful for forgiven-ness.

I have always thought that the woman, this unnamed woman, knows something about the character of Jesus. She knows that Jesus is so loving and gracious that she is assured he will not reject her gift to Him. It is not work, it is not righteousness, and it is not anointing Jesus which saves her. It is her faith. Faith that is always first a gift of God. In other words: she doesn't anoint Jesus to earn God's favor, she anoints Jesus in response to God's love. She tries to love Jesus as he has first loved her.

It is a story that I have told before, but it bares repeating. Back in the fall of 2007, a woman arrived at our church, walking in off the street with a bottle of Piggly Wiggly Extra Virgin Olive Oil. She had the look of a hard, hard life about her. The look of desperation and regret. “Can you please anoint me?” she asked. “My pastor, I can't find him, and I am to go to hospital tomorrow for surgery – I think I have cancer – so please will you anoint me?” So I went and got Howard, and Virginia, and we stood in this sanctuary and we anointed her head with oil and prayed God's protection over her, God's healing in her life. I mention her today because I cannot think about this woman in Luke -- or the widow with her oil in the stories of Elijah in 1 Kings 17 – that I do not think about this woman whose head I touched, and for whose heal I prayed.

Very often we seem to think that we are touched when God blesses us -- that we are anointed by God for service or sacrifice. But if this story of Jesus would have any merit as to how we see and know Jesus then it just might be that we receive God's anointing best when we bless God and offer God our tears and our faith as acts of lavish devotion.

The only mistake is hold the devotion back as Simon, the Pharisee, who refuses to offer the woman any grace in the account, ultimately does. The only mistake is to see the woman, in her great depravity and need, as anyone other than we, we ourselves.

Maybe she has remained nameless so that we could insert our names upon her name, and our stories upon her story?

We all should be so wanton in our desire to express our love to God. If that is what anointing might mean, then go and get your oil and start smearing today.

That is to say, who really gets blessed, the anointer or the anointed?

The house or the pastor?

The woman or church?

The baby whose baptized, or the church which gets to offer its hopes and prayers?

There is that somewhat simple t-shirt that I sometimes see folk wearing – “Blessed to be a blessing.” There is something to that, really. And while it is not particularly profound, and it is not all that there is to know we still might think that it is a fine start. Blessed by finding the blessing of forgiveness she had long sought, this unnamed woman in Luke, in turn blesses God with her love.

It turns out that part of our call is to consecrate and be consecrated, and once consecrated, to consecrate again.

May God give us His wisdom that we might find and seek places where might share our gratitude for the grace Jesus has given us.

Amen.