

## “Let Your Hair Down”

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June 17, 2007  
Text: Luke 7:36-50

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The setting is our next 5th Sunday potluck dinner. We're downstairs with plenty of people and as always, plenty of food, and we've got a guest speaker. We're having a great time – eating, drinking, talking with people with whom we are comfortable and enjoy being around. You hear somebody say: “That’s what I like about this church – people get along so well together – you know, like family.” “Yeah, me too,” someone else says. “Joe and I, the kids too, we looked around a lot before we found this place; going first to this church and then to that one, Sunday after Sunday, but it wasn’t until we got here that we seemed, well, to fit, you know?”

Well, we're well into the dinner – the dessert table is being visited – and a woman slips in from the alley door by the kitchen. Nobody really notices her at first. But then, as she begins moving on through the room around the tables, nobody can help but notice her. The way she is dressed. The orange hair. The dark makeup. The tattoos, body piercing: nose ring, lip ring, tongue stud. Whispers about her jump from table to table – everybody asking the same thing: “Why? Why her? Why here? Somebody like her, what is she doing at our potluck?” Whispers turn into gasps as the woman moves on toward the table where the guest speaker is seated. You've heard about him – he's from another community. He works in the inner city with the homeless and drug abusers. Apparently he's a preacher, although his credentials are questionable. The woman reaches his table – throws her arms around him, gives him a big hug and kiss – clings to him and sobs softly on his shoulder. There's still whispering going on at the tables, some wondering doesn't he know about her? Doesn't he know who she really is? But the guest preacher isn't disturbed. He doesn't stammer in embarrassment, or push her away, or pry her hands from his lapels. Instead, like Jesus himself, he turns to see her and to listen to her and to receive the offering of her praise. Only, of course, this is Jesus himself.

You heard Luke's account of this encounter. Actually all four gospel writers offer a similar anointing story. Luke's isn't a parallel story, but hints and similarities are enough to tease the mind. For example Matthew and Mark agree with Luke that the name of the host was Simon, but they identify him as a leper. John agrees with Luke that the woman anointed Jesus' feet, not his head. But John also agrees with the others that the anointing was in Bethany, while Luke's story is apparently set in Galilee. Matthew and Mark agree with Luke that the woman is unnamed; John says she was Mary, sister of Lazarus. The three other writers place the event late in Jesus' ministry and relate it to His death; Luke's story is one of love and forgiveness.

There's one aspect of this story that caught my attention this week. This woman enters Simon's house carrying an alabaster flask of ointment and walks over to where Jesus is reclining at the table. She positions herself behind Him near His feet. In view of what she does next, she must have either bent over or knelt to reach His feet. She begins to weep profusely onto His feet and to dry them with her hair. Her hair must be loose at this point to serve as a makeshift towel. It is this detail that intrigued me – you see, a decent woman never let her hair down in public. The style for women at that time was to wear their hair long, but to bind it in some way so that it did not hang down loosely. Often this involved braiding. Cloth bands, pins, and combs were used to restrain the hair in a chaste and often ornamental way.

In antiquity, a woman's unbound hair and the act of unbinding the hair often had sexual connotations. Haven't we seen that image countless times in movies or television when the woman takes off her glasses, unpins her hair, shakes her head, and is instantly more desirable? Some commentators have suggested that this woman's gesture with her hair shows her to be a sexually promiscuous woman or a prostitute. Nothing in the text implies that her appearance marks her as a prostitute or sexually loose woman. Luke simply introduces her as a woman of the city who was a sinner. We're left to draw our own conclusions about the nature of her sin; prostitution is certainly a possibility, but so is adultery. In any case, her unbound hair does not reveal the nature of her sin. The narrative leaves the possibilities open.

In the ancient Mediterranean world, when a woman wears her hair unbound or unbinds her hair, this can be a sexually suggestive act. But there is historical evidence that it can also be an expression of religious devotion, or a sign of mourning, or a symbolic expression of distress. Wearing one's hair unbound was also a hairstyle for Greek and Roman unmarried girls. And it was also a precaution related to baptism. In apostolic times, the instructions laid down for women about to be baptized included that they remove their jewelry and loose their hair. One interpretation of this in the ancient world held that demons took up residence in jewelry. Since bound hair was typically fixed in place with bands, pins, or combs, unbinding the hair and removing these items would prevent the demons from going into the water with the person being baptized. So why had this woman let down her hair?

Well, before we answer that question, let's remember that this story of the encounter at Simon's house is a story of contrasts. There is a contrast between Simon and the woman in their response to Jesus. Simon furnished no water, no towel, no kiss, and no oil to Jesus as Jesus entered Simon's house. Zero hospitality. This behavior displayed at best, indifference and at worst, disrespect. The woman on the other hand, spontaneously offered her tears, her hair, her kisses, and her perfume in a touching display of love and gratitude.

There is also a contrast between Simon and the woman in their responses to sin and forgiveness. Simon can sure see sin in others, but not in his own life. He is an eagle-eyed sin hunter when it comes to spotting sin in the lives of other people, like the woman. But his eyes seem to fail him when he looks at his own life. Simon also fails to see that Jesus is the source of forgiveness. It seems Simon loved little – both God and others.

The woman, however, has seen her own sin most clearly. She is strongly aware of the sin in her own life, and therefore, not hunting for sin in the lives of others, including Simon. Her awareness of sin leads her to seek God's forgiveness through Jesus. She loved much – both God and others.

That's why I believe she has unbound her hair – not to be sexually provocative, or indecent – not to break etiquette. I believe the woman's gesture with her hair reflects that she's been forgiven prior to this point and comes to show her gratitude and devotion. Or maybe she comes weighed down by guilt, seeking forgiveness and acceptance, which she receives in the end. Whatever the case, it is an act of extravagance in response to the love and grace of God which she experienced in the presence of Jesus Christ.

One more contrast that I see – it's between Simon and Jesus in their responses to sinners. Simon, being a good Pharisee, would have kept his distance from someone for fear of becoming unclean – for fear that their sin might rub off on him. "Pharisee" means separated one. He also had an image to uphold and a good name to protect. His disgust for sinners like her would be apparent by his attitude toward them. His self-righteousness would render Simon unable to forgive.

Jesus, on the other hand, let sinners, like this woman touch Him and get near Him. He didn't keep His distance. Instead Jesus often sought them out and tried to shorten the distance. If they came into His presence, He didn't run away. By being close, by listening, by being accessible, Jesus let sinners know that God cared, and that they could be forgiven.

Simon's attitude and behavior was as if he was carrying a sign saying, "Sinner – get lost! Don't even think of coming near me. You are never welcome in my house. You're beyond God's reach." Jesus' sign was "Sinner, come to me. You're always welcome in my presence – God's reach extends especially to you."

Isn't that why we are here Sunday after Sunday? We crash the party – we move to the head table – we're here because we know that this is where the party is – the table is set, the bread is ready, and the wine poured, and we know that the guest of honor is present to see us and listen to us and receive the offering of our praises. We're here every Sunday to let our hair down – to hear His words, "Your sins are forgiven."

You know, the Gospel of Luke has never been set to music. But if this particular story makes it to stage or screen, I could envision this woman standing behind Jesus weeping with gratitude and then washing His feet, taking down her hair, drying His feet with her hair, while singing to Him. I could hear her singing something like this:

I peered through windows, watched life go by, dreamed of tomorrow, but  
stayed inside  
The past was holding me, keeping life at bay, I wandered lost in yesterday,  
Wanting to fly, but scared to try  
Then someone like you found someone like me and suddenly nothing is the  
same  
My heart's taken wing, and I feel so alive – cause someone like you found  
me.  
It's like you took my dreams and made each one real  
You reached inside of me and made me feel  
And now I see a world I've never seen before

Your love has opened every door  
You've set me free now I can soar  
For someone like you found someone like me,  
You touched my heart – nothing is the same  
There's a new way to live, a new way to love  
Cause someone like you found me.  
Someone like you found someone like me  
And suddenly nothing will ever be the same  
My heart's taken wing and I feel so alive  
Cause someone like you loves me.  
Loves me.

(From the musical "Jekyll and Hyde")

Lord Jesus, we are people from the city who are sinners and who are grateful for your forgiveness.  
Thank you that someone like you loves someone like us. Amen.

Thanks to Charles Cosgrove for his article on "A Woman's Unbound Hair" in the *Journal of Biblical Literature*, and to Michael Jones for his insights on the story's contrast.