

This May Get a Bit Messy!

[Text -Luke 7:36-50]

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As a child, when I first heard the story of the woman washing Jesus' feet with her tears and drying them with her hair, I remember thinking, "Ewww, that wouldn't work very well - all that dirty, gritty, tangled hair [shudder!]" Hearing this story again as an adult, I can still envision the entwined mess that this bold act of remarkable humility creates. These days, however, it's not the physical messiness that strikes me; it's the messed-up pious posturing and arrogant disdain directed toward that woman, and toward Jesus. Admittedly, her actions would be rather jarring, whether she was identified as a "sinner" or not. In First Century Israel, a woman was only supposed to let her hair down privately, or in the presence of her husband. And in most cultures - even today - publically washing someone's feet with one's tears and drying them with one's hair, would probably damage *anyone's* reputation! Of course this woman already has a sullied reputation; and her actions certainly don't improve Jesus' standing in the eyes of his religious contemporaries.

A truly righteous "man of God" should have recoiled in disgust at being touched in that manner! So by allowing this outrageous act to continue, Jesus himself is smeared with the same seedy reputation as the one touching him. And Simon the Pharisee, as host of this rapidly deteriorating dinner party, has his own reputation to consider. He thinks to himself, "If this man were really a prophet, he would know what kind of woman this is who is touching him - that she is a *sinner!*" And that sets up the marvelous twist in this story's plot. Just as Simon is wondering, "Doesn't Jesus know what kind of person this woman is?" Jesus tells a story that makes it clear that he absolutely knows what kind

of woman she is. Yet more than that, he knows exactly what sort of person Simon is!

This woman fully recognizes, and is profoundly grateful for the tremendous depth of Divine love, forgiveness, and grace that Jesus extends to her. Simon, on the other hand, foolishly refuses to recognize his own need for that same love, forgiveness and grace. Like many highly religious people [then and now] Simon is super-sensitive to the sins and weakness of others, yet completely blind to his own sins and failures - especially his failure to show kindness and compassion to those who are hurting and struggling. Jesus' focused mission is to help all people experience, and share, the abundance of Divine love, forgiveness, and grace. However, when we become so focused on the messiness and missteps of others, we can completely miss our own opportunities to experience that gracious compassion which we all so deeply need.

In the midst of the physical, emotional, and spiritual messiness of her actions, the woman who washes Jesus' feet gives us a beautiful example! She bravely opens her heart and freely pours-out her gratitude and gift to Jesus - the One who has shown her what Divine love, welcome, and acceptance looks like and feels like. This courageously humble woman shows us how we can best live-out our faith: lavishly, lovingly, without reservation, and without worrying about "respectable" religious customs or stuffy societal restraints! I think a key component of the ministry of Brecksville United Church of Christ is that we openly invite, welcome, and affirm many of the people who society and religion often devalue and dismiss - especially those of the LGBT community. This extravagant outreach not only strengthens the Body of Christ, it can also help bring wholeness and peace to our fractured and troubled world. Because when genuine acceptance and love is actually practiced in our churches, it has a much better

chance of being realized in our larger society and throughout the world.

Jesus Christ invites all people to live Life to the fullest - to celebrate how wonderfully [and differently] each of us is made. And the one, all-inclusive commandment he gives us, is that we love one another just as he loves us - freely and fully, without judgment, and without holding-back. Which brings us to the final and truly messy part of this morning's narrative: looking closely at our own attitudes and behaviors. Are you and I like Simon the Pharisee - worried about appearances, and focusing on the faults of others in order to discount our own? Do we overstate and exaggerate the shortcomings of our spouses, children, neighbors, friends, co-workers, [or my personal favorite] those who disagree with us? Or are we like that amazing woman, who gratefully comes to Jesus - recognizing our own weaknesses, problems and sins - deeply moved and thankful that he embodies and proclaims the Divine forgiveness, healing and restoration that we need?

Chances are, we're a bit like both of them; at least I know I am. Sometimes I am utterly amazed at the Divine compassion and grace that I have experienced throughout my life - often through kind and caring people like you! Yet I am equally amazed at how I can sometimes leave a spiritually uplifting gathering like this, and within the *hour* be grumbling or grouching about something or someone that I find disagreeable or displeasing. I imagine this is why we call it "practicing" our Faith: we've got to keep at it, as we strive to get it right! We've got to acknowledge our own brokenness and self-absorbed nature, and keep coming back to find the forgiveness, grace and encouragement we need to do better.

Life truly is a complex and complicated thing; and the truth is that from time to time we will make a mess of things - each of us, and all of us. Fortunately, there is another truth upon which we can all

rely: That the Holy Source from whom we all derive loves us, forgives us, and empowers us to become more gracious and compassionate, day after day. So now it's up to your and me to roll-up our sleeves, let-down our hair, and get to work