Were you surprised when you got to church this morning? I wonder if anyone here was surprised by the message announced from the altar or the words spoken from the lectern. Were you surprised to hear that your sins are forgiven? Were you surprised that each of the lessons ended with a clear statement of God’s good news for sinners? Did you think to yourself: **Wow, I really didn’t see that coming this morning!**

I don’t think you did. I think most of us know that when we come into God’s house, we know that we are going to hear his Word and we pretty much know what he is going to say. Jesus is going to tell us about forgiveness and he is going to tell us about love. The temptation for us who know what Jesus wants to tell us is to stop listening to him. We know what he is going to say, so perhaps we think to ourselves: **Oh, I know this already. Same old, same old. Let me know when he is done.**

In our text for today, Jesus went to the home of a Pharisee. That Pharisee probably thought he knew what Jesus was going to say. But Jesus surprised people that day. He surprised the Pharisee and he surprised the woman who came to him. So today, as Jesus comes to be with us in his Word, let’s listen to his words as though we have never heard them before. When he says to us as he said to Simon: **I have something to tell you,** let’s listen carefully to our teacher. Let’s hear what he has to tell us. Let’s hear him tell us about great forgiveness and great love.

Luke tells us: **When a woman who had lived a sinful life in that town learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee’s house, she brought an alabaster jar of perfume, and as she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them.**

The Pharisees were a group of people who prided themselves on being righteous. They were devout Jews who carefully and publicly tried to follow all of God’s laws and more. We do not know for sure why this Pharisee invited Jesus to eat with him, but there is a good chance that he did so because it would make him look good. People would see him eating with Jesus, a prophet, and be impressed.

So you can imagine how disturbed he must have been to see Jesus allow this sinful woman to come and touch him. We do not know exactly what kind of sinful life she had led, but it was some kind of sin that the people in town knew about and it was sin that was a big part of her life. The sin may even have been her occupation. And Simon thought to himself that Jesus must not be a real prophet if he was associating with this kind of person. A prophet would know better than that.

Then Jesus told Simon a story: **Two men owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him 500 denarii, and the other 50. Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he canceled the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?** Simon reluctantly answered: **I suppose the one who had the bigger debt canceled.** Then Jesus said: **You have judged correctly.** The one with the bigger debt would love him more.

The sinful woman was the one who had a great debt of sin. She was the one who was so burdened by her guilt that it brought her to tears. She was the one who came to Jesus because she knew that she could not pay back this debt; she could not bear this load by herself. This woman was also the one about whom Jesus said: **Her many sins have been forgiven.** That is what Jesus wanted to say to this woman.

But what did he want to tell Simon the Pharisee? What did Jesus want to tell the one who thought his behavior and his lifestyle was much better than this sinner? What did
Jesus want to say to the one who owed a smaller debt in comparison, but who still could not pay the bill?

Think about that for a minute. If you owe the bank $50,000 and I owe the bank just $5,000, but if both of us are in default on the loan and have no money to pay it back, which of us are in good standing at the bank? Neither of us.

The Pharisee, as outwardly righteous as he was, was really just as sinful before God as the woman leading a sinful life. He may have committed fewer outward sins, but his sinfulness was still too great to pay for on his own.

So what did Jesus want to tell Simon? Was it that the sinful woman really needed great forgiveness, but a righteous Pharisee did not? No. Jesus also wanted to announce forgiveness to the Pharisee. He wanted to announce pardon of his sins, the cancellation of his debt before God. But the fact that he did not take his sin seriously enough to confess it and would rather point out the sins of others put him in danger of losing the forgiveness that Jesus came to give.

Let me ask you something. When you listen to this account, with whom do you identify? Do you identify self with the sinful woman or with the Pharisee? You see, there is a little bit of both of these characters in each of us, but we often do not recognize either one. We might say: **We certainly are not as bad, as sinful as this woman.** But then the truth is we just have not really taken a good look at our account before God and seen how much we really owe.

We have not fully realized that we are bankrupt before God. That is the Pharisee in us. But then from time to time we see just how wretched we are. Maybe it is when someone points it out to us. Maybe it is in the middle of the night when the sins of our past come back to haunt us, or when we have to deal today with the consequences of the sins of yesterday. From time to time we find ourselves weeping at Jesus’ feet, convinced that surely we must have sinned too much, too often, too long, and silently wonder to ourselves if perhaps we might be lost forever.

But Jesus says: **I have something to tell you. Your sins are forgiven.** Again and again Jesus announces to us; he tells us of his great forgiveness - for sins we thought were too big, for sins we took so long to admit, for sins so long past and even for sins yet to come. He tells us of his great forgiveness when we are on our knees in confession. And when we are slow to confess, he sends us his law to remind us just how much we owe, and then, just like the prophet Nathan said to King David, he assures us: **The Lord has taken away your sin. You are not going to die.**

Jesus went to Simon’s house to tell of great forgiveness and also great love. Well, of course, wasn’t it God’s great love for us that led him to forgive us? But that is actually not the only kind of love Jesus is telling us about in this text. He wants to tell us something about the love this woman was showing to Jesus. After Jesus told the parable of the forgiven debts, he turned to Simon and said: **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. You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet. Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven - for she loved much.**

The Pharisee was put off by this woman’s actions. He thought it was inappropriate, foolish, and a waste. But Jesus says that these were acts of love prompted by great forgiveness. Jesus says you can tell how grateful she was for that forgiveness by these
acts of love she was performing. And frankly, he said to Simon, they put you to shame. Now, wouldn’t we kind of agree with Simon that this woman’s actions were a little over the top? Wouldn’t we say that such an emotional display was a little bit too much? Wouldn’t we chime in and suggest that the woman be quiet and the perfume be put to a better use? After all, we would not do anything like that, would we? Not only would it be embarrassing and humiliating, but it seems to be a little excessive.

But Jesus says that this woman’s response of love is totally appropriate. Her many sins had been forgiven, therefore she loved much. There is no such thing as going overboard with love for Jesus. There is no such thing as a waste of effort or expense when it is a grateful response to great forgiveness.

But to our sinful, ungrateful natures, great love always seems excessive. Anything that we do in response to God’s love, always seems inappropriate, foolish, and strange to our fallen world, and even sometimes, to us.

That is what sometimes makes it hard to display our love for our Savior in public - someone might talk about me or make fun of me. That is what makes it hard for me to let go of what is most valuable to me - if I give too much of my time or my money, I might not have enough for me - I might be going a little overboard. So I will just give a little, come occasionally, help every once in a while, but not too much.

It is our nature and our world that tell us our acts of love are a waste. They tell us that our acts of love as individuals are a waste of time. They tell us that our acts of ministry as a congregation are a waste of money. When we spend money to send out missionaries, to do evangelism, to have music and worship, to teach classes and have Sunday School or Vacation Bible School - the world tells us that is a big waste of money because it does not get the results and numbers that we think they should. But when we act in response to the great forgiveness Jesus has announced to each of us, Jesus tells us that’s great love, and that it is an appropriate and natural response to great forgiveness.

Jesus went when he was invited to dinner at the Pharisee’s house that day. He went with something to say. He had something to say to Simon the Pharisee and he had something to say to the sinful woman. The truth is, whenever we gather in Jesus’ name, he comes to us and he says to each one of us, every time: I have something to tell you. And he tells us the same thing every time. He tells us of his great forgiveness - even when he needs to remind us that we need it - and prompts us to respond to his great love with love of our own. And that love, though it will always been excessive and strange to the world, will always be absolutely appropriate and pleasing to the One who died to save us, and who lives to give the peace he promises. Go in peace. Amen.

Pastor Keith Bilitz
St. John Ev. Lutheran Church, Alma City
Trinity Ev. Lutheran Church, Smiths Mill