

**LOVING THE “WRONG” PEOPLE; LUKE 7:36-8:3; JUNE 12, 2016;  
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Today’s story from Luke, as most of the biblical stories are, is masterfully written and falls into what Annie Dillard calls the “literature of illumination” that is, stories, poems, memoirs that open our hearts, minds and eyes.

The very nature of such writing is to make converts – as the Gospels have successfully done these thousands of years. It is through Dillard’s literary lens that I want to consider the story we have today from Luke.

In fact, Dillard makes her own home as a writer in this kind of literature. David and Lucinda Hohn’s son Donovan, a professional writer himself, reviewed with high praise, Dillard’s last book a few weeks ago in the *New York Times*. He called her a modern day Thoreau, a suburban Transcendentalist. To read her is not unlike looking at one of those abstract pictures that suddenly reveals a face or figure.

Dillard walks us in, through, up, down and around the natural world from every conceivable angle, perspective, and vantage point; “I never met a tree,” she says that was “no tree in particular.” She finds her bearings for writing and life in the details.

Like the bark on Andrew Wyeth’s sycamore trees or the intricate print on the lace curtains blowing in his masterpiece, “Wind from the Sea,” Dillard exposes with clear, precise, at times ethereal language the fine details of the world around us; a world that is little more than a blur to our busy lives.

She follows Emerson’s advice to make large the small and to make small or in his words to ‘micryfy’ the large so we come face to face with the peculiarity of a thing – whether a rare species of frog, eclipse of the sun, or the experience of diving into a swimming pool.

Dillard opens our eyes and offers new ways of articulating our experiences. Photography critic Geoff Dyer says those who read her best are those he calls ‘the wide-awake reader’. For, she is, he says, a wide-awake writer remaining awake and leading “a life of concentration” rather than “sleep-walking” through the world. From Jonathan Edwards and the Great Awakening to the present, the best American writing religious and secular, is aimed at waking us up from our spiritual slumber.

In everything she writes she subscribes to what William Butler Yeats said, “there is a world within this world.”

Like tennis coach Brad Gilbert who urged his players “to hit the edges and stretch the court” Dillard urges the same approach to living. Opening a Dillard essay, says Dyer quoting one of her essays, is like opening a summer cottage, “You open a cottage. You barge in with your box of groceries and duffel bag full of books. You drop them on the counter,” Dillard says, “then rush to the far window and look out. Coming into a cottage,” she continues, “is like being born, except we do not come into the world with a box groceries and duffel bag of books. Opening a cottage is like being born, [because] the moment you enter, you have all the time you are ever going to have.”

Luke's story today is like opening a summer cottage. We turn the key, carry our baggage into the front room and rush to the window which offers a spectacular, compelling view of abundant life – in the woman who washes Jesus' feet.

When I read Luke's detailed description of her expressions of gratitude to Jesus; his account of the distant, aloof, superior-acting Simon and Simon's condescending and judgmental assessment of the man who was his dinner guest; then Simon, hiding his disdain behind his good manners all the while ignoring the customary duties of the host;

when I am this far into the story, I realize Luke has masterfully juxtaposed the picture of an authentic, feeling, expressive and honest human being next to the picture of a shallow, duplicitous, and shrunken chameleon of a person.

And yet, it is Simon – his home, his hosting of a guest for dinner, his position in society – recognized for his learning, his professional life, his devotion to the church – it is in Simon that I see myself; I am not the woman of the city whose story Luke does not share except that her sin – whatever it may have been, the alleged prostitution some have claimed for her having no basis in the story – her sin is like a great "debt" Luke says using a monetary metaphor. We do know that her sin has marginalized her in the eyes of those who consider themselves proper and her improper.

Already, I am uncomfortable. Where is this story going? I sense an impending collision; a messy outcome at what was to be a pleasant little dinner party. The setting and tension could be a John Cheever suburban train wreck of a story or one of Buffalo's own celebrated playwright A.R. Guerney's society scandals.

Jesus, aware of Simon's silent criticism for allowing one he deems unacceptable to wash his feet, tells Simon he has a story to share. It is a simple parable about a creditor who had two debtors one with great debt, one with little debt; the creditor forgives both. Which would be more grateful? Jesus asks Simon. The one with the larger debt, Simon "supposes" – tentative, perhaps unsure himself where this is leading.

Jesus tells Simon he is spot on; he then turns to the woman and asks Simon if he *sees* the woman – it seems, at first, an odd question; but then like a shoe falling I am preparing myself for the thud on the floor. What seemed an innocuous little tale is going to be an indictment of Simon and me for our blindness.

No, Simon does not see the woman or who she really is; he does not see her humanity but more importantly her great capacity to show her unrestrained love for God; Luke implies that she has only heard about Jesus, the man who preached the forgiveness of Yahweh, the message of hope and good news that changed her life. It is encountering him in her hometown that compels her to honor him. Simon and I have no idea who this woman really is washing Jesus' feet with her tears.

Further to her credit, she performs the acts of hospitality the host is to perform for a guest but which Simon forgot and failed to perform for Jesus. Simon fails to see Jesus even though he too is standing there.

Jesus then tells Simon that her sins which were many have been forgiven; that's the reason she is able to show such great love – she is profoundly grateful. Then, the other shoe drops, Jesus says, “the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.”

Ouch! That hits home. I don't like to think of myself as a great sinner. I don't readily admit to anyone, often even myself, the need I have to look good, to be in control, to be successful by the world's standards. Despite Simon's and my religious principles, our *governing* principles for daily living have to do more with image and independence – than surrender and faith; thank you very much God, don't call us, we'll call you when you are needed.

The sad result is that God who is ready, willing and able to forgive me my ancient Adam and Eve impulse to be like God, to be my own god, even seeing me clearly for who I am in my darkest self and willing to take me back, even here at my worst when I need it most, I never get to that all forgiving, healing embrace because I tell myself it's for someone else; and thank goodness, I do not need it.

It is remarkable to me how current and relevant this story from Luke is; despite the world and our own nation's considerable – what some think are insurmountable self-induced problems – we are more determined than ever to reject the part of our Christian faith that names human nature for what it is – sinful.

But just because a theology of human nature that uses the word “sin” is thought by some to be antiquated and should be thrown into the dustbin of history, I do know – from my experience personally and as a pastor – that there are moments when our lives and relationships are indeed the scenes of train wrecks and scandals. Sooner or later we all have our moments in the crucible of a diagnosis or broken relationship or some stupid, arrogant decision or behavior. And that's when Luke gets our attention.

I don't know where you find yourself in this story but if you happen to be here as someone, in effect, off the streets, someone unaccustomed to sitting at the table with the righteous, someone who doesn't know everything about scripture, or the church, or Jesus, but someone who knows enough to know that Jesus is here for sinners, then welcome. The test of our fellowship in this congregation, in light of today's Gospel, is the presence of at least a few people like you. If there are no obviously sinful, extravagantly grateful people among us, then we're not the church Jesus meant for us to be.

One of Annie Dillard's great gifts, one of Luke's great gifts is the ability to frame the world we live in such a way as to get our attention. If we see who this woman and we ourselves really are it sheds light on this church and every church.

The one place where that woman is welcome is the street, among people like herself. What she needs is a community of forgiven and forgiving sinners.

The story screams the need for a church, not just any church but one that says, “You are welcome here.” The question is how does a church made up of Simon's become a welcoming forgiving congregation?

Self-awareness of our debt makes all the difference; you lose everything or you rack up enough debt, back-breaking debt and you begin to reconsider this whole thing – church, God, Jesus, the Bible – and you find gratitude or gratitude finds you.

I have seen this kind of gratitude in AA, Al-anon and other kindred spirit meetings; I have seen it, in rescue dogs who know they've been rescued, in rescue people who know that they've been saved by the grace of God through a sequence of events they could not have planned or even conceived if they tried; it just came to them as a unearned and unexpected gift.

We get to a point where we decide not to over-think things any more, we just accept – like the woman in today's story – trusting a Higher Power; finally letting go so that that Power/Spirit/Life Force can enter fully into our life and relationships.

It takes some of us longer than others. C.S. Lewis *Screwtape Letters* is the account of a person much like many of us, the Simon's of the world – 'artful dodgers' Fred Buechner called us, 'hedgers of bets' – trying to save face and in the process losing our lives.

But, of course, that's the beauty of it too; no one is forcing us to do or say or believe anything.

It's all there, right in front of our noses. Either we see it or we don't.  
Amen.