

Scripture Reading:  
Luke 7:36-8:3

### **Are We Simon?**

Jesus said “Your faith has saved you.” Salvation used to be one of the trickiest words for me. I grew up in a Christian culture where what I believed and what I understood the bible to say about the grace and love of God and Jesus was not accepted. I grew up in a system that focused on who and what God would **not** deem appropriate. And yet the more I studied the life of Jesus, the more I noticed he focused on loving those categorized as inappropriate. I soon learned that because of my beliefs I likely was not saved. Well at least that is what I was told and believed for a long time. It’s probably for reasons just like this that liberal Christian churches seem to want to shy away from the word salvation. That and sin. And yet I find myself asking, but what is the purpose of our faith without salvation? And what are we saved from if not sin? Jesus said to this vulnerable, outcast woman “Your faith has saved you.”

What exactly does Jesus mean by this? Does the crashing of a party make this woman a saint? Is the pouring of ointment and washing his feet with her tears and hair the kind of honour it takes for salvation? We might think so if we didn’t go back in the chapter and realize that Jesus has also just healed/saved the son of a widow it seems, simply because he had compassion on her. If we go back to Luke chapter 6 we listen to Jesus naming the weak and vulnerable as blessed. My understanding of Salvation is connection, acceptance, freedom, relationship, companionship, worthiness.

Jesus is in the business of touching lives, especially lives that are considered untouchable or inappropriate.

And when we are touched by Jesus, when we are moved by the spirit, when we connect with God we will find ourselves changed, we will find ourselves called to more. We find ourselves more free, saved from what enslaved us. And what that looks like for you, might be entirely different than what it looks like for me.

Yesterday several of us gathered at a presbytery event and in that gathering Janet Gear proposed to us five theological preferences we can find just within the United Church of Canada. Truth is we could find each of these within this room right here and now. I am not going to get into the nitty-gritty of those and yet yesterday reminded me that as we live and work in faith communities we worship, live and work with a whole lot of diversity. With a myriad of understandings of God and faith. And so as I speak what I say might resonate with you, or you might think I’m completely on the wrong side of the track. And that’s okay. As long as we are open to hearing what God might be saying to us as individuals and community.

Now, I am going to confess to you. I asked some of your leadership what they thought you might need to hear, because I get to come in and say the things that you might not like to hear or be challenged on. The good news is Sandy said - actually these folks are great. They are doing amazing, we don't really have a lot of struggles. And then a little while later I got another email and she said, can you say a bit about your project, can you talk about change because that is not easy for us. So you are going to hear some of those things and hopefully some of my experience and connection with this scripture might move you in faith and community. Because my understand of the purpose of a sermon is that it is something that will hopefully make us think about and challenge your faith. Not something in which I stand here as the preacher and tell what you are to believe. And so I invite you to wonder Who are we are in this story? Are we the unworthy woman wiping Jesus' feet with our tears? or are we Simon and the other elite Pharisees looking over the situation with judgment?

When I read this scriptures a myriad of questions began to run through my mind. Who is this woman coming in unwelcome? What gave her such courage? How afraid was she to enter that room? What drew her to Jesus? Was she looking for salvation or was that just an added bonus in this situation? What gives someone so unworthy, so outcast the courage to burst into the scene? I work with women who have experienced abuse both in and outside of their homes and I see their lives in this story and I know beyond the shadow of a doubt something powerful moved this woman to courage beyond measure to show up that day. Somehow Jesus had already touched her life and let her know she was worthy. Was it that someone had born witness to Jesus and shared it with her? Was she friends with the widow of Nain and she realized that Jesus had changed her friends life, she was going to take a chance for the same opportunity? Something/someone drew her there that day.

And then the questions about Simon started running through my mind and that's where the challenge really hit. Am I like Simon? Who would I judge for entering the situation? Are we in the church more like Simon? Who do we question and judge when they come in our doors? What style of worship isn't worthy of our faith?

This woman was all about honouring and worshiping Jesus and she was seen as inappropriate. Would we allow those outside our doors to come in and worship in a new and different way, in a way we don't deem appropriate? Do we welcome those who don't fit the mould? Or are we like Simon and the pharisees questioning what is appropriate in the house of God. My guess is we would say yes of course all are welcome, and I think the reality is we want to be welcoming, but welcoming the newcomer or a new way of worship or being church can be really hard for us. We (yes even the liberals amongst us) become certain about whom and what God includes and who is worthy of God's love and grace. Especially when it comes to church activities and worship.

Yesterday we discovered that the majority of us in the UCC land in the ecclesial or ecumenical categories meaning a lot of what we do is about keeping the church, pretty much the same. Now I admit when Janet started talking about the ecumenical category - the category that focussed on keeping the church together as is, I thought - Oh that's the Anglicans. I'm worshiping with them

right now. Yah, they don't get it. And then I quickly realized oh, and the United's. We can get really focussed on keeping things our way. We do programs on the side to help sustain us just the way we are.

For the last 7 years I have been working on an exciting, major project with Squamish United Church. The reality is when they hired me as their minister they asked me to help them build this project. They hired me because of my background in social work and my desire to see church reach beyond its walls. The congregation had already made clear that moving into a new way of being was something they wanted, but that has not made the journey an easy one every step of the way because what we are doing is shaking up the norm, it's not the status quo.

I won't go into all the details of how we got to this place other than to say Squamish United Church knew it was time to do church differently. It was partly motivated by a need to repair or rebuild a rundown facility but it was also motivated by a desire to be a church in the downtown core that cared for those most in need. It was motivated by a variety of theologies, beliefs and desires for the church.

So at this time we in Squamish are in the construction phase of Centrepoint a facility that will house Sea to Sky Community Services and Squamish United Church in downtown Squamish. SUC chose to donate the land to STSCS so that they could build their offices, counselling centre, day care facility, day programs, and more, we have also partnered with BC housing and they will be building 30 affordable housing apartments on site, the church will build a new sanctuary and offices and share the meeting rooms and day care space with community services.

As a minister, social worker and counsellor this facility is a dream and a vision that is coming to fruition. The possibilities and potential for ways in which we will care for the community and those in need is exciting. Way beyond what we could ever dream of doing on our own. The congregation at times is so excited and energized about these possibilities for connection, outreach, justice and ministry that we have sessions where 10 full pages of flip chart paper are filled with opportunity.

And then at other times we do what we do. We start to talk about money.... and then we talk about how the United Church of Canada is dying.... and then we talk about how we want our kitchen and our coffee room and our children's facility and our sanctuary exactly the way we want it... and we can rebuild but we can let them cut down the oak tree...then we **panic** about money and we talk about building programs while cutting staff... and then we get offended by the way Sea to Sky is taking such ownership of the project... and then we worry about the fact that they are getting so much from us, what are we getting back? And we worry outsiders are going to want to come in and use our space...And I realize we are like Simon, we want to follow Jesus but what Jesus requires of us at times is just too much. I mean we even sold our pews... What kind of church will we become?

All of these questions have surfaced more than once in the last seven years as you can well imagine but somehow we have not stifled the spirit with our questions and concerns and stresses and now our building is down and a new one is going up. Most of us are excited, all of us are scared because we don't know what this new thing will look like. We are simply trusting that God is leading the way.

For several years we have focused on having a mustard seed of faith hoping and praying we will soon see that faith spread farther and wider than we could ever imagine. We pray that our faith is deeply rooted in the ground and because of that the tree will grow and those in need will be resting in our branches. (just after I wrote this paragraph I received an email letting us know that 75% of the pilings are in place for the residential portion and the sanctuary floor is done - what a rush of energy and excitement that little email gave me. I was like a giddy little girl later that day when I popped over to the building site to see it for myself). God is doing a new thing, we know it and right now we are starting to dream anew about how we might participate with what God has for us in that place.

But change can be hard, especially for churches that have been well established for a long time. I think Squamish United Church will discover one day that the times of struggle have created the gift of engaging more deeply with the holy in where she would have us go.

The church as a whole is in a time of rediscovery - most of you will know that, and in this time I think we will be challenged over and over to let the spirit lead us into a new way of being. Honestly many have questioned our decision to partner - ministers, colleagues, church members, community members have all asked why. My answer to why is because embodying the extravagant welcome and grace and love and justice of Jesus is what we are to be about.

If ever there was a time for the church to welcome the tax-collector, the centurion, the widow, the outcast, the ones that Jesus calls worthy it is now. We can get so set in our ways that we become unwelcoming to those we desire to welcome. When I read this scripture I imagined the shock and dismay of Simon as this woman entered his home and made such an ungodly spectacle of herself. I could imagine the looks and sneers and the whispers from the guests - how inappropriate, who is going to cast this woman out. And then 'snap' Jesus calls them on their stuff and tells the woman she is free, saved, forgiven.

I wonder how many people have come to us so that they could weep at the feet of Jesus and have walked away because they have not felt invited into our Kingdom. They have come to believe they are not worthy, not because they have felt God say it, but they have felt the church say it. And I wonder if we are willing to open our eyes, to live church in a new way so that every person who has the courage to come, every person who is willing to enter the room with the fear of being ridiculed or unwelcome will hear the words "your faith has saved you, go in peace."

We are living in an exciting time for the church, a time when I believe if we are willing to engage it we will see that the spirit is blowing in and shaking us up. We are in a time when we get to

look at these stories of Jesus and recognize we are being called to something new, to welcoming in a new way, to worship in a new way, to live in a new way. We are in a time where we are being called to rediscover salvation for all who are worthy. I absolutely love being a part of it, and it scares the pants off me. But thank God even when we don't get it right we can know we are welcomed and loved and when we truly know that, we will begin to love and welcome others in the same way.

May we participate with the God who says - go now in peace, your faith has saved you to every person we encounter along the way.

Amen.