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Surprise!

Luke 7:36-50 36 One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house, and took his place at table. 37 And behold, a woman of the city, who was a sinner, when she learned that he was at table in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster flask of ointment, 38 and standing behind him at his feet, weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears, and wiped them with the hair of her head, and kissed his feet, and anointed them with the ointment. 39 Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner." 40 And Jesus answering said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." And he answered, "What is it, Teacher?" 41 "A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. 42 When they could not pay, he forgave them both. Now which of them will love him more?" 43 Simon answered, "The one, I suppose, to whom he forgave more." And he said to him, "You have judged rightly." 44 Then turning toward the woman he said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house, you gave me no water for my feet, but she has wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. 45 You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss my feet. 46 You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. 47 Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much; but he who is forgiven little, loves little." 48 And he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." 49 Then those who were at table with him began to say among themselves, "Who is this, who even forgives sins?" 50 And he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

Whether by car or by plane or train, I love to travel. When I lived in California, I would sometimes save up a hundred-and-fifty dollars or so and make a plane trip – just because it was fun – going from Sacramento to San Francisco to Santa Barbara to Los Angeles to Orange County and back. It became my hobby to learn which routes could be had for cheap and which ones allowed you to do a ridiculous number of connections. In fact, when the fare is the same, I'd almost always rather do connecting flights than direct – more frequent flyer miles after all! But mostly what I like about travel is the surprises that it brings. Not the bad kind of surprises like having your luggage lost or finding out that the hotel that was described as three star was actually overrated by about 15 stars. No, it is the good kind of surprises that I most cherish: road trips with Barbara where we found the perfect meal at the perfect out-of-the way café in some small town; or the conversation that we had that we had been meaning to have but

which somehow just seemed to come easier and better while driving than when caught up in the hecticness of everyday life. Surprises can be good; they can expand you. They can give you experiences that you would have never otherwise had.

Now, as I have said, some travel surprises can be not-so-good as well. One of those happened to a friend of mine many years ago when I was in graduate school in Chicago. It was Thanksgiving break and my friend – we'll call him "John" – decided to make a quick car trip to see his family in Nebraska. Now John was always the adventurous sort. So adventurous, in fact, that he had been dating two women, both of whom thought he was very, very serious about them. And on John's drive to Nebraska, he stopped at one of the interstate rest areas in Iowa to take a break. As he was walking back to his car, who should he see pull into the rest area but woman #1. It was pure coincidence; she was visiting friends for the long weekend in Iowa. So they hugged and nuzzled a little, until out of the corner of his eye John saw pulling into the rest area parking lot what looked like Woman # 2's car. "No, it can't be," thought John; "That's just too much of a coincidence." But coincidences do happen and Woman #2 pulled her car in right next to John's car and got out and stood there and glared at him. Of course, Woman #1 had immediately figured out what the glare meant and now she too took a step back and added her own version of the Death Glare. And, reported John, all he could think of to say at that moment was "What a surprise! What a surprise!"

Today we are continuing our summer sermon series on stories from the Gospel of Luke. And today's story is also about someone who went on a trip, even if a very short one, but who also found herself surprised in what happened to her on that short journey. To understand it, we need to know something more about of the customs of the day in that time and place. The meal that Jesus was invited to would probably have taken place in a yard next to house, a kind of picnic, in an area that was open to the

street. In Hawaii, most such gatherings were held in the carports of houses, and on a Friday evening it was not unusual to drive through the neighborhood and see dozens of end-of-the-week gatherings. In Luke's and Jesus's day, it would also have been not at all unusual for the poor – who could see the party going on from the street – to wander in to get some scraps and leftovers to eat. And that is likely what the woman was planning on doing. Hearing that there was party in Jesus' honor, she made her short journey to get some of the leavings for her and her family. She went in quietly, hoping to get in and out quickly and without being noticed because she was probably sure Jesus would want nothing to do with her. Now the text says that she was "a sinner." Now, that could mean any number of things from being a prostitute to being someone who was an informant for the hated Roman tax collectors. But exactly what is meant isn't important. What is important is that by that word, Luke means us to understand that she was a person on the margins of society, someone who for whatever reason would not have been one of the invited guests; she was not the sort of person that you would want at your party, not "respectable."

And so she set out on her short journey expecting to grab some quick leftovers, to be ignored and disdained, and to silently be on her way without anyone paying any attention to her and pretending that she really wasn't there. But her journey too gets interrupted by a surprise. She runs smack dab into Jesus and – probably out of embarrassment – begins to cry. And that's where the surprise happens. Instead of getting hustled back out to the street or scolded, Jesus accepts her. She is included. She is treated like one of the invited guests. The story tells us that Jesus offered her forgiveness. And she was surprised indeed. Now, sometimes we can tend to hear Bible stories about forgiveness and aren't quite sure how to connect them up with anything real. It seems such a soft and fuzzy and even unrealistic concept. But actually, forgiveness here is a very simple concept and it is exemplified by Jesus' actions: For it means, in part, being accepted by someone, it means finding someone

who believes in what you can be despite what you have been. It means being offered the possibility of being released from something that had trapped you. (Now of course, as I have said before, there may well be times that forgiveness is not possible – or not yet possible. It may come at too high a price or may not be appropriate yet. The time may not be ripe. But nonetheless, sometimes through the work of God, the possibility of it may indeed open up before us as a startling surprise).

Now journeys and travels, whether the woman in the story's journey or ours, have to go on; the moments of stopping and the surprises must give way to getting on with it. But this idea of life as a journey can mislead us if we're not careful. I have a friend who plans his vacations down to the minute. He always knows exactly where he is going to stop, what his schedule is, what his gas mileage is. The first statement out of his mouth when he gets where he is going is invariably "We sure made good time, didn't we?" But life is just not that kind of trip, is it? Sometimes life's journey is much more meandering, sometimes the way isn't always clear and impossible to schedule. We don't have mile markers to show us where we are, and sometimes, it seems, we don't even have very good directions.

And so it is with both us and with the woman in Luke's story. For that woman in Luke's story left that party with a feeling of acceptance and forgiveness and yet no doubt her travels through life would not now be all smooth sailing. If life is a journey, it is not a journey whose twists and turns can be fully predicted. Yet God goes with us, always and forever. For that is finally the point of both of these stories: God accepts us. Whether we think we deserve it or not, the truth of the gospel is that God accepts us. We do not earn God's acceptance and forgiveness, and none of us is ever outside of or marginal to the love of God, as the woman may have thought. God is always there seeking to forgive us when we need forgiving, empowering us when we need rejuvenation, loving us when we may not feel loveable, seeking to show us the way

forward when we are lost – and accepting us as we are and always loving us too much to leave us where we are.

I have a friend who once had a very, very difficult year, a year that found himself making journeys to many places he hadn't ever expected, with many surprises along the way, some of which were welcome but many of which were not. At the end of that year, he remarked to me, "This year, I think I'm just going to stay put because I'm just really, really tired of 'growth experiences.'" Understandably. And yet, the staying put part is not an option for him or for any of us, is it? Life will continue to take us places that we didn't expect, our travels will continue to surprise us in ways that perhaps never imagined. For whether we literally venture thousands of miles or never leave our neighborhood, all of us will travel, we will change, we will be met with surprises indeed. We will not like all of those surprises, but if we remember that God goes with us in every new thing, on every new day, we may be better able to open ourselves to those "growth experiences" that are possible, we can find that God is there seeking to bring good out of even the most difficult or unwelcome surprises, and to make even better the surprises that do delight us. As one pastor put it in his book on Jonah - a man who surely had his share of unwelcome and often self-inflicted surprises on his journey – *"God's capacity to clean things up is infinitely greater than our human capacity to mess things up."* That's the best surprise of all, I think, and I am grateful that, as the title of that pastor's book puts it, we are indeed continually "Surprised by Grace" as God goes with us no matter what, no matter where.

So my friends, as our journeys continue – as individuals, couples, families, and even as church - sometimes those journeys will take us places that, all things we considered, we may not wish we had to go. And God may even prompt and nudge and

¹Rev. Tullian Tchividjian, quoted at <http://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2010/august/leadership-book-interview-surprised-by-grace-with-tullian.html>

lure us down new pathways that we may not be sure about. But the good news this and every morning is that indeed the God of grace always and ever goes with us. For that Good News, thanks be to God. Amen.