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First UMC

Springboro, Ohio

June 12, 2016

Series: “Life Together With Luke”

Message: “Do You Know Your Debt?”

Scripture: Luke 7:36-8:3

As we continue in our series, “Life Together with Luke,” today we turn to the last section of Luke 7. What we find is a scene that contrasts how life together plays out when it is lived according to the ways of the world and how life plays out when it is lived according to God’s Kingdom ways.

We begin with a dinner party at Simon the Pharisee’s house. It’s a who’s who of the town. All the movers and shakers, the networked, and the power players are there. This is the good old boy network that makes things happen, or not.

They had all been talking about this strange new rabbi on the scene, Jesus. They were curious about him. They weren’t sure how he would fit in with their worldview. They wanted to check him out. And so they agreed to invite him to their next dinner party.

And Simon invited Jesus to come to his home. And Jesus did.

But it was awkward. Have you ever been in that situation? You’re invited to an event and everyone is polite to you, but it is very clear that you are the outsider. You are there as a guest, sort of. You are also there to fill a role, and to be assessed.

Those asking you think they have done you an honor. But honestly, it’s just work. They all know each other well. They know the routine. They know what’s expected. And while they are polite for the most part, it’s very obvious that they have not invited you there to become one of them. They have invited you there as an object of interest, not as an equal, not as one of them.

We know this because Jesus calls Simon out on it later. We can guess that there was someone there to wash the other’s feet. But it wasn’t offered to Jesus. The others greeted each other with a warm welcome, with kisses on the cheeks, oil on the head. But Jesus was perhaps told to come in and sit down, over there. They would be with him shortly, perhaps call on him to give the opening prayer. It was awkward, but it wasn’t nearly as bad as what was to come.

There was a woman in town. She was ‘that woman,’ the one with a reputation. She was the one that everyone loved to hate. There were lots of rumors. Who knew what was true? It could have been a chronic illness that made her ‘unclean,’ it could have been that she was a victim of her husband’s decisions, it could have been that she made a bad decision herself…one she was never allowed to live down.

No one really knew her except as the one they kept their distance from, the one that they went out of their way to avoid.

And her reaction to Jesus is much different. While they have been assessing, judging, scrutinizing him, figuring out how he will fit into their plan, whether he is good enough for them, she knows who he is, she realizes God’s grace flowing through him and knows that everything has changed. He has seen her as a ‘child of God,’ not just as an object, as a ‘sinner.’

She has nothing to lose. What else can they do to her that they haven’t already done? She might never have a chance again. And so she enters the party, uninvited.

Everyone stops and stares. Some gasp. No one knows where to look or what to do.

Not only is her presence uncomfortable, which is bad enough, but then she has this jar of perfume and she is crying and pouring it on Jesus’ feet and wiping them with her hair, hair that is not supposed to be let down except in the privacy of one’s own home. And here Jesus is, letting her, not stopping her.

Simon is mortified. This is a disaster. How can this be happening to him? In his home?

So he turns to Jesus. He can see that trouble follows him. He gives him a lecture, a reprimand: “If you we’re truly a prophet, you would know who this woman is, that she is a sinner.”

Of course, this is based on the assumption that they agree on how sinner’s should be treated—that they should be condemned harshly and removed from the good and proper religious people—that this one particular sin becomes their defining feature.

Jesus doesn’t accept Simon’s assessment. He pushes back with a story that offers a picture of the way things work in God’s version of life together.

He tells the story of two men who both owed a large debt. One had a larger debt than the other, but both were so large that they could never repay. And then, amazingly, both had their debt covered. The question Jesus then asked was who appreciated this generous act more? Of course it is the one who had the bigger debt forgiven.

What a powerful way of identifying what was really going on here. Without saying it directly, Jesus is saying, the only difference between you and this woman, Simon, is that she knows her debt. You think you don’t have any debt just because yours is smaller than hers. But the truth is, you’re both sinners. Neither one of you can pay your debt back on your own.

But those who realize that they have had many sins forgiven love much, and are incredibly grateful in response.

But those who think their debt is small don’t’ think they need to be forgiven. And so they love little.

So the key here to our life together lived in God’s way is that we know our debt. We realize that our debt to God and to others is far more than we could ever repay ourselves, than we could ever understand. Sometimes it’s because of our own wrong choices, because of our sinfulness. Sometimes our debt comes from all that God has given us, that our family and friends and community have given us. We’re so blessed with the environment, the people, and the education that we have received. We are indebted in many ways, negative and positive.

To realize our debt means that we realize just how blessed we are. First, that we have been forgiven so completely by God’s grace in Jesus Christ. Our debt has been cleared and there is no record of it. And we are blessed by the way that others have done that for us. They have loved us in spite of ourselves. They have loved us for the best of who we are rather than the worst, just as God does. They have forgiven us when we have been at our worst.

When we realize this, our hearts are filled with gratitude and we love much. Our hearts are filled with love that overflows, in thanksgiving to God, in loving Jesus by serving him in the world.

Gratitude in response to seeing how God has loved and forgiven us. Gratitude for the gift of life and the opportunity to live in response to this gift—to live debt free.

So the question for our life together today is, “Do you know your debt?” In the same way that this woman did, do you know that you have been forgiven much? So much that your heart responds with gratitude and much love?

Or are you more like Simon? He did not know his debt. He was continually trying to prove that is debt was less that everyone else’s. Are you still trying to prove that you don’t really owe God or others that much? That God doesn’t really need to pay your debt because you’re not that bad? And you can just work harder and get it paid back if you need to anyway. Simon’s way of thinking breaks down our life together.

It seems counterintuitive, but when we see our debt for what it is, when we realize that Jesus loves us anyway, when we realize that he pays the debt for us and we are set free, when we truly realize that, we are filled with gratitude that leads us to love much. And that love is at the very heart of our life together as Christians and it affects every aspect of how we live together with others.

Today I invite you to accept your debt, to acknowledge and confess that you have a debt to God and to others that you could never repay, and to give thanks, because it’s been paid for you. It’s all gift. It’s all gift, and so let that gratitude and love run through you fill you, flow out of you to all people, not because their debt has been greater or lesser than yours, but because for all of us this debt that we could not pay on our own has been paid in full.

Thanks be to God!