

**June 17, 2007**  
**Psalm 86, Luke 7:36-50**  
**Dr. James W. Riley**

**“Given a Life on Loan”**

*One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and took his place at the table. And a woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment. 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 kind of woman this is who is touching him—that she is a sinner." Jesus spoke up and said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." "Teacher," he replied, "Speak." "A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he canceled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?" Simon answered, "I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt." And Jesus said to him, "You have judged rightly." 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 bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little." Then he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?" And he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace." (Luke 7:36-50)*

Imagine that you are hosting a dinner party at your home that includes an honored guest, such as a distinguished senator or governor. It is a wonderful occasion. But then you look outside. A limousine pulls up to your home and from right out of jail walks a well-known media celebrity with a trail of photographers behind her. She puts her arm around your special guest and creates quite a stir. You are shocked! You would know a little how Simon felt. Simon, a very dignified, upstanding Pharisee, throws a dinner party with his friends for the new Rabbi in town and his party is crashed by a notorious woman who shocks the party goers. What Jesus does is even more shocking with his gracious response to the sinful woman who has been transformed by the grace of God. Jesus responded to others, even to the worse of people, with grace, and so he taught, "Be merciful as your Heavenly Father is merciful." Jesus was teaching that if a person realizes how much mercy he or she has received from God, that person will be merciful to others.

This woman, who knows God's mercy, knows she has been given a new life on loan from God, and she gives what she can in a simple, small act of love. Mother Theresa said, "There are no great deeds; only small deeds done in great love." When she was given the Nobel Peace Prize, reporters questioned her afterwards, and asked her why she thought she was given this honor. She replied, "It must be because of all the lepers on the streets of Calcutta that she helped and brought into her home to die with dignity." A reporter then asked her, "Well, how many lepers did you help off the street?" She answered, "I suppose it has been 30,000 lepers that I helped to get off the streets of Calcutta. But I never would have picked up 30,000 if I had not first picked up the first leper. There are no great deeds, only small deeds done in great love." The reason she was recognized was not that she did *one great big* thing, but because she did a number of *small* merciful things over time.

Tom is an African-American who grew up in Marion, IN – the oldest of six children in his family. At age 18 his mother died leaving five children for his father to raise. In the same year, 1943, he was drafted into WWII. Tom worried how his father could take care of the rest of the children, the youngest of whom was only two. Who would drive his blind brother to school? Tom fortunately had a great father whose faith in God would guide him in raising five children by himself. One grew up to be a nurse, another, a social worker, another became a teacher, and his blind brother grew up to become a gifted attorney who won a famous landmark civil rights case. What an impact this loving father had on his children.

Tom was sent to Great Lakes, IL, where all the African-American recruits in the Navy were trained separately from the whites. At their completion of training, those with high test scores were selected for a landmark mission to be the first

African-American sailors to serve on ships in jobs other than waiters or cooks. Up to this time African-Americans were not allowed in Navy schools. To withstand the racial harassment that they would later encounter they were all given sensitivity training. The top-performing sixteen were chosen for an experimental officer training program. Although they were given only half the training time as the white officers, all sixteen not only passed but received the best scores ever achieved at the Great Lakes training center.

Tom was trained to be an electrician so he was assigned as an electrician at one of the U. S. Navy ships, but, because of racial discrimination, he was instead given kitchen and toilet duties. No white sailor was denied getting their assigned specialty. But Tom did his best even with these demeaning jobs that he was wrongly forced to do. Finally, he was assigned as an electrician and given a uniform with the electrician symbol on it, the first time an African-American had worn one. Whenever he left ship on liberty, white sailors would accuse him of stealing a white man's uniform. Even with this pain of rejection by his fellow sailors, he kept on trusting God that somehow things would go well for him. God honored his humility and hard work. In the exams for Electrician's Mate Third Class, he was the only one of his group to pass. Then he passed Second Class and then First Class. When one of the white officers would not eat with him in the officers' dining room, Tom again trusted God and did not resort to anger or resentment, and God in his mercy had the white man reassigned to another ship. Tom was promoted to train the new companies of recruits. He treated them all with respect whether they were white or black. Tom led these men with the attitude that God loves all people regardless of race. Tom faithfully served our country for 30 years in the Navy.

With God's grace, Tom transformed the Navy and helped to advance racial equality in the U.S. military. His determination not to return evil for evil, and his simple demonstration of God's mercy to all enabled him to tear down the racial barriers. Tom is a member of the Light of the World Christian Church, and is a part of the Great Banquet ministry here at our church. His dedication as a brother in Christ continues today because he knows his life is a gift on loan from God. I hold him in the highest regard as one of the most deeply Christian men I know.

When Christ touches a person's life with his amazing grace, it transforms his thoughts, his feelings and most importantly, his actions. The Christian faith is not just something we do inside of a church building. It transforms how we live outside these walls. It empowers how we handle racism and sexism, prejudices, obstacles and setbacks. It enables us to love people as Christ loves them.

A couple of weeks ago my wife, Debby, asked me to come down to her school to help her pack up her teaching supplies from her third grade IPS classroom. As we were working to pack up the stuff, one of her students who had stayed for the after school program, came back up to Debby's classroom and offered to help carry out some stuff to her car. He was very gracious of him to help out. It touched our hearts that this boy would want to help. I had never met him, but Debby had told me about him and we had been praying for him. He and his older brother live with his father who is an alcoholic. His mother who is a cocaine addict had left them. This spring he and his older brother arrived crying at school one morning and with tears his older brother told his teacher that he and his brother had been beaten by their father because of their bad grades. Immediately, both of these boys were helped by the school officials who contacted Child Protective Services. Police then attempted to locate their father. Later that same day the father got into an argument with the brother of his girlfriend and he stabbed and killed this man. The two young brothers spent the rest of the school year with foster parents. So I met this young boy that day. He was so gracious to help Debby and I load up our cars. I shook his hand and thanked him. I could sense he wanted to return some of the love he had received at school. My heart went out to him, for Debby had told me what was going to happen to him. The court had assigned him and his brother to live with their mother in another state. We will not see him again and will not know what will happen to him. We only can pray. I know Christ loves him, no matter what his parents have done. Will he find those in his new location who will reach out to him and who will love him with Christ's unconditional love?

Jesus came into this world to save the lost and the lonely, those rejected or neglected in society. And because of this, he found resistance to such unconditional love.

When Jesus went to dinner with Simon, he encountered the kind of unthinking prejudice with which good, religious people sometime are infected. How this woman got into this dinner party we are not told. But she must have felt comfortable to be with Jesus, who had gotten the reputation for hanging out with sinners. She is so freed from the societal barriers that would not have let her in the room that she comes and sits by Jesus and allows her tears of joy and appreciation to flow on to his feet. Simon says nothing. But Jesus could read his inner thoughts. In spite of his judgmental attitude, Jesus still loves Simon as much as he loves the poor woman at his feet. To help Simon understand the power of mercy, he told the story of the two debtors to show that the one that knew himself to be the greater debtor was the one who showed how grateful he was to be forgiven. Simon answers correctly, and Jesus then applies the logic of his story's conclusion. Simon had invited Jesus to his home but offered no hospitality. In contrast, the woman pours out expensive perfume and gives her heart to Jesus.

The point of the story is not that Simon has *less* for which to be forgiven than the woman, but rather, *because he did not recognize his need* for forgiveness, he loved less. And she, because she recognized her need for forgiveness, received more and had more to give. She realized that her life was not something to cling to but freely give back to the One who gave it to her. Her life was a gift on loan from God. She could not take for granted what God had given her, as Simon did.

One week ago on Saturday I participated in our annual "Take It to Town" – a one-day urban mission event. I went out to Shepherd Community on the near northeast side of town and helped - with a group of us from Second - with the yard work. During a tour of their new facility we learned about their ministry to children and youth in the near northeast side. As an example of their ministry to youth, we were told about Curtis. Curtis was a troubled teenager who came to the ministry of Shepherd Community a few years ago. He had been such a difficult child that he was kicked out of school twice and his step-father kicked him out of his house. He ended up sleeping with friends or in the park. He was certain to end up as another "statistic" in the city of Indianapolis.

Curtis' life began to change when he walked through the doors of Shepherd Community where he was accepted and told about Christ's love for him. Soon, he chose not to accept the negative labels that others had put on him and he began to believe he could have a different life. His participation at Shepherd Community gave him hope to finish high school and encouraged him on to go to college. In 2004 he graduated from college *Cum Laude* with a degree in Family Counseling. He has returned to Shepherd Community to serve on their staff and help the high school students know they are loved and valued and encourage them to go on to college. Curtis shares with these young people the mercy he had received. He has married and he now owns a home in a neighborhood in which he was once homeless. He knows his life is a gift from God, and all he has been given is on loan.

Jesus said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace." Jesus said, "Go and take the mercy you have received and give it away." We have been given mercy – not to keep it to ourselves – but to pour it out to others. If you have, by God's mercy, been saved by Jesus Christ, then you have been saved for something. You can't do everything but you can do something. You can't be Mother Teresa. But you can do as she did by helping one person at a time. This past Easter you donated hundreds of Easter baskets that were distributed at such organizations as Day Spring, a shelter for homeless women and children. A portion of these Easter baskets at Day Spring went to teenagers, one of whom was a 14 year old girl, who had been abducted at her bus stop and brutally raped. She needed to know the love God has for her. Your Easter basket helped her to know she is loved. A single simple act of mercy can change a person's life. These last few weeks our members collected and gave 37 "goodie bags" to be given the youth of Shepherd Community summer program who yesterday left on an educational trip across the southeastern United States, visiting historic sites. In addition, each one of these youth have a member of our church praying for them and sending them a note each day of their eight day trip. We may never know the full impact of these bags, notes and prayers. When we know our lives are on loan from God, we look for those opportunities to share what we have been given. On the Sunday of the dedication of our new building, Dr. Enright closed with these words: "After all, this building isn't really ours; it's God's gift to us to use to wrap God's presence around this city and our world." Our lives are not really ours; they're given on loan to be used to wrap God's presence, God's mercy around this city and our world.