

- I worked with the North American Committee on Calendar and Lectionary which produced the lectionary used in this chapel as well as many other churches throughout the United States, of all major denominations. We almost chickened, to use a biblical phrase, when we came to this particular story, feeling that it was so singularly different and so delicate that it might lend itself all too readily to misconstruction and misunderstanding. In other words I did not personally choose this gospel for this morning at Duke Chapel. It's the gospel reading for most major denominations throughout the United States this morning. At least for those that use the lectionary. But back to Luke, and what his possible intent might have been to include this story. It says that a sinful woman; a phrase that was written by a man; heard that Jesus was at Simon's house and she went there quietly, came in with others who were hanging around, probably caging the waiters for free samples of the food, eavesdropping on the conversation, getting as close as they could to the guest of honor and in that crowd was the central figure of this story, a prostitute, a woman of the streets, a streetwalker. Suppose you were with the village notables invited by the leading pharisee in town for a Lord's Day evening supper and you were in this rather posh setting, but people, as was the custom in the Near East in the first century, were in some numbers, coming in and out. What if among them a woman of this sort did appear, but not only appeared, but stood behind where Jesus was reclining and began to weep copiously. Her tears dropping down on Jesus' feet. She let her hair down from her head. In itself, an indelicate thing for a woman to do in a public place. She dried Jesus' feet with her hair and then anointed Jesus feet, it says, with ointment. That's the New Testament word for perfume. Perfume was not like Chanel 5, a liquid. It was more like Oil of Olay and I know I'm already over my depth with my own wife and all others who know something about perfumes. All I'm trying to say is that it was not just a liquid. It was more like an unguent that would ooze out of the alabaster container when the long narrow neck would be snapped. It was quite expensive, this kind of perfume, running somewhere between \$60 and \$100 for a little alabaster flagon. This woman is weeping, drying her Lord's feet with her hair and using up to perhaps even \$100 of her earnings to anoint his feet. If we do not admit that we're impressed by that, I think we're not being truthful to ourselves. Simon; that's the first we have the name of the host, he's not mentioned until now in this story; clucks with disapproval deeply annoyed at Jesus pretending to be a prophet and a man of God. If he really were authentic, he'd know what kind of woman this is and have nothing to do with her. He's thinking that, so the story tells us. He doesn't say it aloud, but the next verse says, "and Jesus answered him." Jesus answered him. Jesus intuited what Simon was thinking and saying. He said, "Simon, I've got something to say to you." "Well, "say on Lord." Then he tells that little parable about a man, two men, one of whom owes, let's say, \$500 and the other \$50, just to get the contrast that's sought for here. When neither of them could come up with the money when the loans were due, he forgave them both and then asked a question of Simon, with a self-evident answer. "Simon, which of these two do you think would love Jesus?" I slipped. That's what the parable means. Who would love their banker more, which of these two? Well, obviously the one who had loaned the most money. To whom the most money had been loaned. And that's a very fascinating thing to say, because the parable is one on forgiveness and love. With a curious implication. Love, that much abused word overly mentioned, not so readily understood, just given some very special meaning in this particular instance. For it is clearly indicated in what Jesus is

saying, that only the people who were aware that they are forgiven sinners, or put a slightly different way, only the people who are deeply aware of the extent of their forgiveness can love well enough to forgive others. Now that's quite an assertion, but I think, on reflection, you will agree too that it's profoundly true. Paul is right in the epistle that it is really impossible to earn forgiveness by good works. We are forgiven, as an act of God's grace in Jesus Christ. Forgiveness is the consequence of something. Not even repentance alone can secure forgiveness. When someone, including ourselves, is repentant for something that's done wrong, it is clear in Paul's writings that we can be assured then that grace and forgiveness have already started to flow, but as the shorter catechism says, although repentance be of such importance that forgiveness almost never appears without it, it shall never be deemed to be the cause of forgiveness, but rather its consequence. By the time we're repentant, we are already being forgiven. When Christians gather in some numbers, Our foibles are apparent and evident, even though we wish they were not. I've just come for Minneapolis, Minnesota attending the sessions of our General Assembly. It's like your General Conference in the Methodist Church and like the senior body in all major denominations. It was a glorious, wonderful, reassuring set of meetings full of the spirit, full of prophetic insight and courage in a troubled world like this, but it was apparent, if you sat quietly, and watched carefully that not all who name the name seemed to share his humility or gave any slight evidence of having been forgiven. It would be ill mannered of me and intemperate indeed, if I were to suggest what proportion such persons occupied in the total number of those present. That would be an unforgivable thing to attempt, but in the interest of honesty and candor it has to be remarked in our hearing and that evidently is what Luke had in mind, that our own capacity to love one another is inseparably connected with our self-perception as forgiven sinners. Without the awareness of our own history with God's grace, there is little likelihood indeed that we'll get beyond lust or self-gratification or ego trips in any feeble efforts we have in the direction of love. Love flows from forgiveness. As forgiven people, we have a wonderful chance to love. Go lovingly into the world. In Christ's name. Amen. (organ music) (choir singing)

- The Lord be with you.

- And also with you.

- Let us pray. Most kind and gracious God who art above us and in us and through us, we bow in humble reverence before thee, seeking a fresh awareness of thy life giving presence. In so doing, we offer these prayers for others that in our remembering of their needs, we may become aware of our own neediness, as we stand in utter dependency upon thee. Let us pray for those who suffer in our world, for the masses of starving people that whatever language they may speak, their cries of anguish will be heard, for homeless people everywhere, for those who dwell in the streets of our nation's cities, for thousands of refugees who roam the earth searching for a home, for runaway children who find no security in being at home, that each may find a place of rest and understanding. Let us pray for those who are bereaved over the loss of a loved one, over news of a debilitating illness, over memories of happier days gone by that thy healing presence may restore them to fullness of life. Let us pray for those who live with oppression and unrest as their constant companions, especially for the people of South Africa, that justice may be restored. Let us pray for those caught in the struggles of discernment. For all those contemplating life changing decisions, grant them wisdom and a true sense of thy presence in their lives. For those who seek to know thee, yet struggle

to believe, grant them the courage required to take the leap of faith. For the leaders of all the nations that they may be moved to compassion and to lead us in the pathway of peace. Let us pray for all those who feel unloved or unwanted, for those who seek to destroy themselves or others, for those who indulge in material excess, attempting to fill an interior void, for those who live within institutions surrounded by people, yet lonely beyond words. Heal these thy children, oh God, that they may feel forgiven and know the unique worth that thou has bestowed upon them. These and the many unspoken concerns of this congregation we lift unto thee, redeeming God, trusting in thy goodness, confident in thy power to heal, grateful that thou art love for all eternity. In the name of Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen. And now in the spirit of thanksgiving for God's forgiveness, let us offer our gifts and ourselves to God. (organ music) (choir singing) (organ music) (choir singing) Oh God of love we give thee thanks for whatsoever though has given to us richly to enjoy, for health and vigor, for the joys of friendship and especially on the this Father's Day, for the love and care of home and for every good gift of happiness and strength. We praise thee for all thy servants who by their example and encouragement have helped us on our way and for every vision of thyself, which thou hast ever given us in sacrament or in prayer and we humbly beseech thee that all thy benefits we may use in they service and the glory of thy holy name. These things we pray in the name of Jesus Christ who taught us to pray with confidence. Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory forever. Amen. (organ music) And now go forth in peace and be of good courage. Hold fast to that which is good, rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit and may the blessing of God, creator, Christ and Holy Spirit be with you all now and forevermore. (choir singing) (organ music) (organ music)