

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Fourth Sunday after Pentecost
June 12, 2016

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The incident of the anointing of Jesus by the woman that was a sinner is found only in Saint Luke's Gospel. He tells it beautifully and with great affection for the details. What transpires builds to that very awkward moment at a banquet, and the subsequent conversation. You won't find any guidance in *Emily Post* or *Martha Stewart* to cover this predicament!

My take on the description of the woman is that, *as a result of Christ's preaching* in her town, she had seen God in Jesus. In that same moment she had also seen the horror of her own position. The woman is described as ἀμαρτωλός (**hamartolos**, the town prostitute). But when she heard Christ preach she came to the conclusion that the only hope for her life was somehow connected to this preacher.

That is what happens when we confront holiness. It makes our own sinfulness apparent. In the early days of television the ads for laundry detergent had "Brand X" looking quite respectable until it was compared to *New Blue Cheer*. Holiness does that. By comparison we look pretty dingy.

The Lord had gone to dinner and somehow the **hamartolos** had got into the banquet room. To this day Mediterranean-region houses have open courtyards and airy public rooms of easy access. That made it easy for her to get in. But once inside, she had to act quickly. There was no opportunity for a private meeting with the Lord. But the woman found herself right *behind* Jesus as He reclined on a couch at the banquet table. And for a brief moment she was paralyzed into inaction.

But looking at the Lord's Sacred Feet she began to cry. Did she remember reading Isaiah in her long-lost innocence? "How beautiful are the feet of Him that bringeth good tidings." Before she knew it she had covered the Lord's feet with tears. So she let down her hair, (doing which in public is a shameful thing among Jews), and wiped His feet with her hair. Then, because she was carrying a little flask of perfumed ointment, she sprinkled it on the Lord's feet. It is a remarkable scene, and the woman's action and speechless affection for Jesus are quite beyond invention. But it was an awkward moment.... for everybody except God Incarnate!

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The Lord Jesus, for His part, continued with the meal and conversations until the fragrance of the perfume got the attention of the banquet host. The host, named Simon, thought to himself Jesus was not quite the holy man if He allowed this harlot to touch Him. That sets up the Lord's teaching, and you can reread it for yourself.

Some years ago, when Kurt Waldheim died, the newspapers carried the full obituary. Dr. Waldheim had been United Nations Secretary General and later President of Austria. Sometime after he became a prominent diplomat the issue surfaced of his having been a German army officer in World War Two. Waldheim was never accused of war crimes, but the unit to which he was attached was indeed implicated in atrocities. One day in his capacity as a head of state, Dr. Waldheim visited the Holy Father. And there was a great outcry against the visit, not only from Jewish groups, but from all over the world. It was argued no one with such a past life should be allowed to visit the Pope. Which means everyone had forgotten the incident of the sinner woman anointing the feet of Jesus! Or perhaps in light of this gospel moment, the *very best thing* an ex-Nazi officer could do was to indeed visit the Pope!

In the gospel account there is no indication from the Lord that forgiveness was withheld until the woman carried out her humiliating action. Hearing Christ preach had *already* brought her to repentance and the assurance of forgiveness. It was this repentance and resolve to amend her life that inspired her with love and gratitude to take action. At the end of the beautiful meeting we see Jesus confirming her assurance and publically declaring her forgiveness.

It all reminds me of that witty little line by George Bernard Shaw: "My tailor is the only one who makes sense to me. He takes my measurements every time he sees me." But tailors do not offer salvation! The meeting of the sinner woman with the Lord had much more in it. It confirms something we know about Our Heavenly Father and His Beloved Son: the Lord does not see as man sees, *but looks on the heart. Always.*