



THE REDHEAD & THE RABBI

Luke 7:36-50



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The Redhead and the Rabbi

Their eyes met across the heads of the crowd. As always, she was on the fringe of things, not really a part of them. The young rabbi had just come to town and people had gathered around him, curious to hear what he had to say. Seeing the crowd, the young redhead saw it as a place where she might turn a trick or two. In a crowd, watching some activity, it's easy to go up behind some man, as though you, too, are interested in what is going on, and whisper into his ear some offer he can't refuse.

She was standing in back of the crowd, her black fishnets and micro mini-skirt hidden from the one who was talking. Her cherry red stilettos gave her a height advantage as she scanned the crowd, looking for a mark. She wasn't really listening to what the rabbi was saying. He was just a man, anyway, and she'd known so many men before and he was just one more.

But as her eyes moved from one person to another, the rabbi looked up, perhaps distracted momentarily by her long red hair. When their eyes met, he smiled. Not that, "... where've you been all my life?" smile that she knew from the singles' bar. Not the apologetic smile of a man with his wife. It was the warm, friendly smile a person might offer to a friend he hadn't seen in a while. She hadn't gotten many of those in her life. Women certainly didn't smile at her that way, and men didn't tend to think of her as a friend.

She stopped scanning the crowd and began to listen. This was about as close as she was likely to get to a religious service. She hadn't set foot inside a synagogue for years. Of course, in her business you didn't have to go to synagogue to hear a sermon. There were plenty of sidewalk preachers who set up on the same corner. They condemned her and her customers. There was a time when she would holler right back at them - tell them where to go - but that didn't help. Now she'd just cross the street.

But this Rabbi wasn't like that. He wasn't really preaching. He was telling stories. He began to tell a story about a young man who couldn't stand to stay at home in his small town anymore. When he came of age, he emptied his trust and headed for the big city. The redhead understood that all right. She remembered the her mother's funeral, the several years she spent minding the household for her father, the rising conflict with her stepmother, and how angry she was when her father sided with his new wife. She remembered packing the cheap duffel, taking the household money from her step-mother's purse, and how she practically ran to the bus station before anyone knew she had left.

The rabbi told how the young man quickly used up his resources, and was abandoned by his new big city friends. As she listened, the woman saw in her mind a young girl, frightened, rebellious, determined not to go back, sitting in a bus station trying to figure out what to do. A friendly businessman offered her a place to stay, and she quickly learned just

how people make it in the city. Now, she couldn't go home. She'd have to tell them how she had survived.

The rabbi, a small-town boy himself, went on to tell how the young man took a chance and went home; and his father welcomed him, with open arms, weeping tears of joy, no questions asked. The redhead – the hooker -- is hooked. Is it possible to go home again? To be accepted? Is it possible that somebody might still care?

She was lost in thought as the rabbi finished his story and the crowd began to disperse. As the rabbi and a few of his followers were about to pass by, she pulled down on her skirt to make it appear longer than it was. Touching his sleeve, she said, "Rabbi, is it true? Is it possible to go home again, even if -- ?" The rabbi stopped her, touching her lips – he actually *touch*ed her. He acknowledged that we can't always make things the way they were - but if there's love, we can experience reconciliation -- not only with family, but with that better self inside of each of us; and with God, who too quickly we assume has rejected us.

She needed time to absorb all this. He'd caught her off guard, this rabbi. She could feel her mascara running and that one eyelash had begun to come loose. The redheaded woman retreated to her room, and the rabbi moved on.

There wasn't anything on TV that evening, so when word got around that the visiting rabbi was preaching, more people than usual showed up for worship. And, of course, there was Simon, the Pharisee, one of the elders of the synagogue, sitting right up front so he wouldn't miss anything. Even before the service started, he'd invited the rabbi over for dinner afterward. When the rabbi accepted, Simon was delighted. The other elders usually got to the visiting dignitaries. Now Simon was first, and he would get the privilege and the prestige. "Who knows," he thought, "this rabbi might turn out to be a real prophet!"

Every seat in the small synagogue was filled. Many people stood outside straining to hear through the open windows. Among them was the young redhead; no longer looking for tricks, but seriously interested in getting a good spot. If she had gone inside, no one would have moved over for her anyway. Even outside, people moved away from her so no one would think she was with them.

The young rabbi was introduced as Jesus of Nazareth, and after a few preliminary remarks, he began to talk about God's love and forgiveness. Several people nodded, including Simon, for God's love of Israel was everyone's favorite subject. But Jesus took a different tack, and instead of focusing on the privilege of being a Jew, or the importance of piety, he suggested that forgiveness is available to all.

The rabbi closed with a story of two people who went into the temple to pray -- an upstanding Pharisee, and a Roman tax collector. The Pharisee thanked God that he was not like the others. The tax collector humbly asked for mercy. Simon liked that part of the story. But when Jesus suggested that the tax collector was the one who was acceptable before God, Simon began to wonder just who he had invited to dinner.

Afterward, Simon wondered if maybe he had misunderstood the intent of Jesus' words. As they made their way along the dusty streets of the town, Simon made it clear to all he met that the visiting rabbi was coming to his house for dinner. They would be welcome to come over later if they wanted to hear what the rabbi had to say. Most of them followed right along, creating a kind of entourage. The red-haired woman followed at a distance.

As they walked along, Simon engaged the rabbi further in conversation. He was disappointed to discover that Jesus hadn't graduated from a respectable school for rabbis, or any school for that matter. He was more of a homespun philosopher -- and not very sophisticated.

Simon's house looked simple enough from the outside, but once inside, you found yourself in a large courtyard, illuminated by torchlight. There was a large low table in the middle with *bancos* around the walls, and pillows the guests could recline on around the table. Certain amenities would have been customary to welcome a guest of honor, but Simon was convinced that Jesus was an unsophisticated bumpkin who'd never miss them.

Simon clapped his hands, the food was brought in, and the guests were seated. It seemed that the rabbi from Nazareth was sufficiently impressed that he didn't even miss the courtesies. In addition to the invited guests, townspeople moving in and out of the courtyard and even some peasants standing in the shadows, hoping to share in a few leftovers.

The redheaded woman entered the courtyard -- one of the last, shyly hanging back, in the shadows. She found a spot near Jesus, where his feet reached into the shadows. It was evident that she had been crying, and was still crying. Images of home flashed through her mind -- and family. She saw herself at home once more -- not the girl she had been, but not the person she was now either. A hope of being something different had become real to her for the first time in years, and she was grateful.

As she knelt at Jesus' feet, she noticed that her tears were making little blotches on Jesus' dusty feet. She was trying to wipe the tears with her hair, when it occurred to her that the host hadn't provided the basic courtesy of having his guest's feet washed. Looking around, she felt the little vial of perfume she kept on a chain around her neck. It had belonged to her mother, and she'd been saving it for special occasion.

She poured it over the rabbi's feet – lavishly, the religious person would have poured a thank-offering on the temple altar. You see, for her it *was* a thank offering. She didn't know much about religion, and wasn't even on very good terms with God, but in the words and actions of this remarkable man, she felt acceptance instead of rejection, inclusion instead of exclusion, understanding instead of judgment. If such a man as this said that God forgave her, she believed that too.

Simon observed the red headed woman kneeling at Jesus' feet. "Well --" he thought, "You don't have to be prophet to know what kind of a woman she is." He didn't say anything. He only raised an eyebrow and gave a fish-eye in their direction. He would've asked her to leave except that would draw even more attention to her. Simon couldn't see a loving act. He only saw a whore -- and he was indignant.

"Simon!" Said the rabbi and the Pharisee jumped a little. "I have something to say to you."

Simon, who was not terribly interested in this guest anymore, tossed a grape into his mouth, and replied indifferently, "Speak, teacher." And Jesus told yet another corny story.

"A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed him fifty dollars, and the other five hundred. When neither could pay, he forgave them both: Now which one will love him more?"

Simon rolled his eyes so guests would see how easy found Jesus' question. "I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt." It was obvious that Simon didn't see any relevance in the story.

"That's right," said Jesus. Then he turned toward the woman, and said, "Do you see this woman?"

Did he *see* her? Did he *see* her? The redheaded woman was all he *could* see! He could die of embarrassment!

"Well, when I came into your home, you gave me no water for my feet, you gave me no kiss of welcome, and you didn't anoint my head with oil." Simon was humiliated. Jesus had indeed noticed Simon's omission of the customary amenities, and now his guests knew it too. Simon – who was always above reproach. But still, what did creditors and debtors have to do with anything?

"This woman," Jesus continued, "bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. She hasn't stopped kissing my feet, and she anointed them with perfume."

Simon wanted to disappear. Not only had his shortcomings been made public, but he was coming off second best – to a common prostitute!

Then Jesus finished, "She has done these things out of love. She loves much, because she knows she's been forgiven much. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little." Looking at the woman, Jesus said, "Your sins are forgiven."

Simon was stunned. He was a good man. He was active in the synagogue. He always kept the law. And this country rabbi was suggesting that this prostitute somehow understood God better than he did. Simon's guests were offended too; if these things could be said of Simon, they could be said of them. "Who does this guy think he is, going around forgiving sin?"

The party was beginning to break up now, and Jesus seized the opportunity to send the young woman on her way. "Go in peace," he said, "and remember, it is your faith that has saved you." Not her tears, not her red hair, not her actions -- but her trust that grace is free, and if we'll reach out to accept it, it makes a difference in our lives.

By the time morning rolled around, the redhead was already on the Greyhound heading for home and family. The fishnets, the stilettos, the micro mini-skirt had been left in the room. She believed God accepted her. She felt acceptance from Jesus. She hoped that her family could do the same.

Simon had spent the night reliving the evening in every painful detail. He finally realized that Jesus hadn't condemned him, or his good deeds, or his religious devotion. Jesus had simply observed that when we're satisfied with how good we are, we forget to be humble. We have little sense of gratitude to God, and little sympathy for others. In short, we don't show much love for God or for others. Simon would always be a Pharisee, whose whole life is devoted to God, but his encounter with Jesus of Nazareth would always remind him that even the best of us need forgiveness.

And Jesus continued through the cities and villages, preaching the good news: God loves us and accepts us as we are, inviting us do the same for ourselves and each other.

Amen