

A BRIDGE TO HEAVEN

By Halcyon Wilson

Call to Worship: *Have Mercy on Me Oh God*, #728 SDA Hymnal reading

Opening Song: *Praise Him, Praise Him*, #249 SDA Hymnal

Closing Song: *My Faith Looks Up to Thee*, #517, or *I Lay My Sins on Jesus*, #298, SDA Hymnal

Scripture: Luke 7:47-50 and Matthew 26:13, NRSV

"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." "Truly I tell you, wherever this good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her."

It is six days before the Passover and there is much to do. I am walking quickly down the dusty path in Bethany. Dust filters through my sandals, in between my toes. The hot sun has almost gone down and the evening breezes are just beginning. How good they feel! I tighten my shawl around me, hiding the alabaster jar, tied by a thin rope around my waist. It is filled with perfume made of nard. It feels heavy as I hurry. Heavy because it cost me so much? It has been a great personal sacrifice. I know many men work 300 days to make as much as this cost! Is it heavy because I am afraid? Excited? Happy?

Going to the home of the Pharisee, Simon, (also known in town as Simon the Leper) has not been an easy decision. I am not welcome there. He knows my past. Actually, he is part of my past! I hold no kind thought about him, but Jesus has told me I must forgive. Jesus! My steps become faster. I pull the shawl tighter around me. The thought of seeing Jesus again quickens my heart. He is being honored at a dinner in Simon's house. My sister Martha is the hostess. Lazarus is there. Will they understand? Will they be angry with me? Embarrassed? It doesn't matter. . . My gratefulness and love for Jesus is all important. He may not be with us much longer. So many important people are angry with Him. I don't understand. After all He has done for our people.

The upper room in Simon's house is easy to find. I step over the sandals lined up by the door. There are many servants running around serving the guests who are reclining on their left elbows and sides, with heads around the table and feet away. They are eating fish cakes, bread, olives, fig cakes, cheese. . . Smells good! I slip in unnoticed and find Jesus. I kneel at His feet hiding myself in my shawl.

To my surprise and horror I see that Jesus' feet have not been washed! What kind of a host is Simon?! All good Jewish hosts have servants wash their guest's feet. Simon is supposed to be honoring Jesus! What a hypocritical show! What an underhanded insult to Jesus! Jesus healed Simon of leprosy! He resurrected Lazarus just two months ago. Simon is sitting right next to Jesus. What is Simon trying to say, self righteously sitting next to Jesus! Tears overflow. . . Tears wash Jesus feet. . . tears of gratitude for my own release from a life of fear and guilt. . . tears of anger at Simon. . . tears of love for Jesus who affirmed my intelligence by assuring me I could sit at His feet and learn, just as the men do. . . tears of exuberance for the healing of my family. . . tears of extravagant love. . .healing. . . forgiveness. . . peace. . .

I realize I have not brought a towel with me! I never dreamed that His feet would not have been washed. I loosen my long hair (which I am not supposed to do in public!) and wipe Jesus' feet with it, kissing them. I quickly open the alabaster jar and pour the perfumed ointment on His feet.

Suddenly there is an unpleasant sound. . . voices whispering. . . now louder. . . "she is a sinner. . . extravagant. . . money should go to the poor. . . what a waste... doesn't the Master know who's touching Him? How could He allow such a thing. . . what a disgrace. . . you know her past. . . what is that woman doing in Simon's house?"

I gasp! I forgot that the perfumed fragrance would, of course, fill the room. I have been found out. Now Jesus will be embarrassed. I hear His voice. . . "Simon, I have something to say to you. . ." He is not scolding me! He is talking to Simon! I lower myself as much as I can, trying to hide in my shawl. I can't believe what I am hearing!

"You see this woman, Simon? I came into your house and you did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You did not give me a kiss, but this woman has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet. I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven. She loves much."

I feel Jesus' strong hands lifting me up. Then Jesus says to me. "Your sins have been forgiven. Your faith has saved you. Go in peace." Turning to the other guests in the room, He says so all can hear, "I tell you, wherever my story is told throughout the world, what this woman has done will also be told, in memory of her."

I, Mary, hurriedly run down the stairs and out into the courtyard. It is dark and I am grateful, for I am weeping uncontrollably with joy, with freedom, with peace, with hope. My sins really have been forgiven. It is not just a feeling, but a full knowledge and assurance from Jesus.. (Adapted from Matthew 26:6-13; Mark 14:3-9; John 12:1-8; SDABC5; DA 557-568)

Today, you and I and all who hear this story still enjoy the fragrance of a lovely deed and an extravagant love. Desire of Ages, p. 563, says, "As far as the gospel extended, Mary's gift would shed its fragrance, and hearts would be blessed through her unstudied act. Kingdoms would rise and fall; the names of monarchs and conquerors would be forgotten; but this woman's deed would be immortalized upon the pages of sacred history. Until time should be no more, that broken alabaster box would tell the story of the abundant love of God for a fallen race."

Mary's anointing of Jesus has also been a symbol of the anointing of His body for burial and resurrection so that my sins are forgiven and thereby I have a bridge to heaven. For this forgiveness is what helps me experience the peace of heaven here on earth, and the hope of a future heaven above.

This bridge to heaven — forgiveness — is not an easy human experience, whether we are wanting to forgive ourselves or whether it be others. Often, it is not even natural.

In his book *Good-bye to Guilt*, Gerald G. Jampolsky writes (p. 70), "True forgiveness is the bridge we walk across that releases us from guilt and fear, and allows us to experience heaven on earth." I love this quotation, because for me, the belief and knowledge that my sins have been forgiven is truly what has given me the freedom to grow and love. Heaven on earth is peace and love. And the release of guilt and fear is only accomplished by experiencing forgiveness.

We are here, this morning, from many places, different stages of growth, different stages of healing, different learning experiences, ages, colors, economic circumstances. Some of us are here because we want to learn, some want to share, some of us hurt, some rejoice, and some are here because we just want to see friends. Join me as I explore the meaning of forgiveness and find the steps that lead us across this bridge.

The purpose of forgiveness for Mary, and for me, is to heal the mind and to reconcile us to each other and to God. When we permit ourselves this experience, we feel sane and at peace. Yet, fear, riddled with doubts, uncertainties and worries, make us feel unloved and unloving. Forgiveness is what takes place within us. It is for our own benefit, not necessarily others. However, we all agree, that it is much easier to forgive others when they are sorry!

In order to understand forgiveness, we first need to understand guilt. The effects of guilt are probably the number one problem facing the world today. Guilt is like taking too many sleeping pills or painkillers, or having sunstroke. One person described her feelings of guilt as, "I thought my brain and body were immobilized, and I was locked in a vice or confined in a prison cell with no hope of escape." (Jampolsky 33)

Guilt makes us feel under attack; it helps justify our feelings of anger toward ourselves or others; it destroys our self esteem and confidence; it makes us feel depressed, hollow, and empty; it destroys our sense of peace and makes us feel unloved and unable to love. It is not an exaggeration to say guilt is self made poison, which we administer to ourselves frequently.

Guilt can be defined as the feeling of self-condemnation that we experience after we do something we think is wrong or the feeling of self-condemnation and anger when we are unable to forgive others.

There is only one known antidote for guilt — complete forgiveness, starting with ourselves and extending to everyone who shares the world with us. Forgiveness means letting go of the past. Unless we forgive others for what we feel they have done to us, we will be unable to forgive ourselves, and unless we forgive ourselves, we will be unable to forgive others.

There are two ways of experiencing forgiveness — to forgive ourselves and to forgive others.

Forgiveness is a process. It may take a lifetime! There is definitely work for us to do in this process

How do we forgive? What is our work?

In reviewing all the Bible texts that talk to us about forgiveness, I'd like to share the steps which I have found helpful:

1. Humble yourselves (2 Chronicles 7:14).

We cannot be arrogant or prideful when we want to experience forgiveness. We can't pray, approach others, or even be honest with ourselves, unless we have a humble spirit, willing to learn and be taught.

2. Acknowledge our sin (Psalm 32:5).

Honesty with ourselves and with God is a necessary step. There are times when we have to say, "Lord, I don't want to forget, or forgive. Please help be to be humble and acknowledge my need."

3. Confess (Psalm 32:5).

I don't think there is any question about the necessity of confessing to our God that we need the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives in order to experience forgiveness and peace. Confession to God is freeing and healing. Knowing that we are loved with our mistakes, in spite of mistakes and even because of our mistakes, gives us the feeling of self-worth necessary for living fully with Christ. Forgiveness and Godly self-worth go hand in hand.

Confessing our sins to others is not such an easy matter. If we have hurt someone else, it does take a humble spirit to confess. If someone else has hurt us, that also takes a humble spirit to accept other's faults and confess our own vulnerability.

Talking over our feelings and coming to an understanding, often helps to deal with the issues that are troubling us. Understanding ourselves and others, helps us deal with the problems. Ask, "What was the other person thinking? Feeling? What was their experience? Their pain? Understand and feel their pain.

I realize that we are not always able to talk and confront other people. They may be gone, dead, unapproachable and/or unwilling to talk to us. But there are ways. Letter writing (without mailing it!), journaling, talking to an empty chair, or talking it over with a trusted friend/counselor. Prayer is very effective! However, this is not an easy assignment.

I want to remind you, that this process may take time and it is harmful to hurry it along in order to finish the steps. Time is often very necessary and I believe with all my knowledge and heart that God gives us the time necessary when we are committed to the ideal. If we hurry it, or skip this understanding, we deny our own true feelings and thereby become dishonest.

4. Be sorry (Psalm 38:18).

Have you noticed how difficult it is to be sorry for that which we may have enjoyed? It may even have felt good to hurt someone! Especially if they hurt us first! And how can we be sorry for what we did or said when we may believe we were right? Is it better to be right or kind? What was the example Jesus gave us? In going over these steps, I realize how much I must pray for a humble attitude, a contrite spirit, and a willing heart. Maybe rule number one should be "I can't do it alone. It is God's gift!"

5. Turn from evil ways (2 Chronicles 7:14), or return to the Lord (Isaiah 55:7), or be converted (Acts 3:19). Jesus had forgiven Mary before, yet she still needed his assurance. Washing Jesus' feet seems to have been a time of reconsecration for her. We also need that time.

Mary had to forgive herself and others for her past. In today's culture we would use different terminology for Mary's "sin." Today, we would say that she was a victim — of her culture, and man's religiosity. When we think of it that way, it truly was a miracle that she experienced forgiveness! Remember Jesus words to her? "Your sins are forgiven. Your faith has saved you. Go in peace."

Desire of Ages, p 567-568, tells us the interesting story of Simon — the same Simon who gave the feast for Jesus and Lazarus. Simon's coldness and neglect toward the Savior showed how little he appreciated the healing he had received. He had thought he honored Jesus by inviting Him to his house. But he now saw himself as he really was. He realized that his religion had been a robe of Pharisaism. He had despised the compassion of Jesus. While Mary was a sinner pardoned, he was a sinner unpardoned. The rigid rule of justice he had desired to enforce against her, condemned him. Simon was touched by the kindness of Jesus in not openly rebuking him before the guests. He had not been treated as he desired Mary to be treated. What an important point! Does this say to us today that public disgrace of a person is not helpful to that person? Jesus was very wise. Stern denunciation would have hardened Simon against repentance, but patient admonition convinced him of his error. His pride was humbled, he repented, and the proud Pharisee became a lowly, self-sacrificing disciple. What would have happened if he had not repented?

6. Jesus is our advocate (1 John 2:1). Our sins are forgiven only through the power of Jesus Christ.

7. As we forgive others (Matthew 6:12), and seventy times seven (Matthew 18:21, 22), and do not return evil for evil (Romans 12:17).

We will be forgiven as we forgive others and as Christ has forgiven us. We must forgive ourselves and others, as often as needed, as Christ has forgiven us over and over. We must not be vindictive. Christ never was. This is more than I can do. How grateful I am for the promise of the Holy Spirit who is with me and will give me this gift freely.

Forgiveness is difficult at times because childhood leaves deep imprints on us all. Although a fresh understanding of God's grace may bring a great new sense of spontaneity and freedom, it takes much more to keep our freedom growing. We may set standards too high, or too low. We must be realistic and educate ourselves in God's will for our lives — not what our childhood "tapes" tell us.

Although a fresh understanding of God's grace may bring a great new sense of spontaneity and freedom—a mountain top experience—it takes much more to keep our new found freedom growing. To begin with, the standards of our early childhood lessons must be realistic. For ourselves and others. If our conscience is overburdened and we feel guilty about things that are not sin, we must learn to educate ourselves and focus on God's expectations for ourselves and others. If we are used to rationalizing God's standards, for ourselves and others, we must educate ourselves and learn to focus only on God's expectations for ourselves and others.

Remember that what God uses, Satan abuses. Satan's preferred strategy is to keep standards too low. But his second choice is to make the standards too high. The person who tries to keep impossibly high standards without accepting a growth process, soon gets so bogged

down that the whole sense of God's grace is lost. There is a guilt from Satan which destroys and a desire from God which challenges us to a better life.

As the Creator of our personalities, God made provisions for our growth. The relationships we have with each other are very important! God didn't choose to put each of us on a separate island, place a Bible in our hand, and tell us to grow! Instead, we were created as social beings and the family, the church family, and other relationships are planned to meet our needs for emotional support and spiritual growth.

Behind these relationships is a dual purpose. God wants us not only to meet each others needs, but also to offer a picture of God to others. John wrote (1 John 4:11, 12, TLB) "Dear friends, since God loves us as much as that, we surely ought to love each other too. For though we have never yet seen God, when we love each other God lives in us and his love within us grows ever stronger." John makes a vital point — the way we relate to others is a training ground for relating to God. If we are always suspicious of people and cannot trust, we are apt to transfer that same attitude toward God. But if we learn we can trust people, we find it easier to trust God. If our childhood experiences have programmed us to expect rejection, punishment, and criticism, but Christian friends give us love, acceptance, and wise correction, we begin to change our expectations and believe that God feels the same way about us.

This experience of forgiveness—this bridge to heaven—will enable us to love freely, fully and joyfully.

It is my prayer, that we walk across the bridge of forgiveness, with Mary, Simon, and each other. May we take the hand of our Savior, accept and give forgiveness, because Jesus has forgiven us. Christ built and gave us this bridge to heaven.

About the Sermon Writer: Halcyon Westphal Wilson is assistant to the President for the Southeastern California Conference and associate pastor at the La Sierra University Seventh-day Adventist Church in Loma Linda, California. She is also a Certified Pastoral Counselor with the American Association of Christian Counselors. She is a presenter and a speaker and enjoys her family.