

Sermon title: Never again will I be “Just fine”

Luke 7:36-50 New International Version (NIV)

Jesus Anointed by a Sinful Woman

³⁶ When one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him, he went to the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table. ³⁷ A woman in that town who lived a sinful life learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's house, so she came there with an alabaster jar of perfume. ³⁸ As she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them.

³⁹ When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, “If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is—that she is a sinner.”

⁴⁰ Jesus answered him, “Simon, I have something to tell you.”

“Tell me, teacher,” he said.

⁴¹ “Two people owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. ⁴² Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he forgave the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?”

⁴³ Simon replied, “I suppose the one who had the bigger debt forgiven.”

“You have judged correctly,” Jesus said.

⁴⁴ Then he turned toward the woman and said to Simon, “Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. ⁴⁵ You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. ⁴⁶ You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet. ⁴⁷ Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—as her great love has shown. But whoever has been forgiven little loves little.”

⁴⁸ Then Jesus said to her, “Your sins are forgiven.”

⁴⁹ The other guests began to say among themselves, “Who is this who even forgives sins?”

⁵⁰ Jesus said to the woman, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.”

When I was a boy out along the Kansas/Colorado border I was raised in the land of numb. Maybe you have been there. Everyone in the Land of Numb is, well, “just fine.” To the question, “How are you doing?”, the answer was and is “Just fine.” And yes, I get that this is a nice and appropriate greeting, and it was used frequently. And that greeting is, well, “just fine” with me. But that’s not really what I want to talk about today.

Friends, even in the church where I was raised everyone was fine -- even Jesus. Is the Jesus you have known in your life “just fine?” Maybe you have met him. Right in the foyer there was Jesus’ picture, brought to you by the color pale white. In the picture that dotted churches across the landscape of the country back in the day, and still today in many congregations, was Jesus standing in a white robe with a little white lamb draped across his shoulders. The day Jesus and the little lamb posed for the picture the make-up artist surely powdered Jesus’ face. The face of Jesus in the picture hanging in my church was almost as white as his robe.

Looking at that picture, Jesus was “just fine.” But of course, fine is not an emotion. It might be a grade of sandpaper but it’s not an emotion. When we think about it, we all know there are just two kinds of emotions – painful emotions and positive emotions and fine is not on either list. In our text this morning the emotions are flowing fast and furious.

Today, I want to speak with you about how to be emotionally present when emotions are raging and even when you are experiencing lots of positive emotions. Emotional health and spiritual health are closely linked. Now when I was a boy – out in the land where everyone was “just fine” – two responses were okay. Men could get angry; women could cry. Men couldn’t cry, of course. When they did, it was embarrassing. Yes, I am generalizing for effect. It was not true of everyone. Some men did cry. And thank goodness. Men should cry. I’m a crier. And the last thing I am doing is talking about crying or not crying. So don’t go there.

But I will tell you that my parents were pretty well entrenched in the land of numb. I loved them a lot but they had it bad. My dad and mom – both wonderful people of faith, and both leaders in the church – never learned or never were allowed to express a wide range of emotions. They were children of poor tenant farmers, both of them. Their parents worked hard to survive. When my dad found a steady job at age 18 where he could earn a steady wage, he stayed for more than 45 years, working his way up the ladder. He spent his life building security and being “just fine” and I was a recipient of his care, and well, of his ways, the good and the bad.

My parents’ motto was “Pull your weight and don’t complain and you’ll be ‘Just fine.’” You worked. You didn’t complain. You kept your mouth shut. When I asked them how they felt, their answer was “With my fingers.” Indeed, they were just fine, well ensconced in the land of numb.

I have chosen this account from Luke 7 this morning because, as you hear my remarks, you can see that no one in this story is “just fine.” NO ONE. Instead, you see here a lot of very painful emotion. So, let me ask you, “Was Jesus just fine?” Can we say of Jesus, “One thing we can say of him, he always was just fine.” You already know my answers: “No, Jesus was not fine.”

Consider the elements in our story...

The story begins with Jesus being invited a party. Have you ever been invited to a party? How did you feel? You might have felt one way when you were 8 and a very different way when you 48. Have you ever been invited a party of muckety-mucks? How did it feel? Exciting? Nerve wracking? Make you feel insecure? ... Have you ever said to your husband who was dragging you along, "I don't have anything to wear." Were you feeling "just fine?" See what I mean. You weren't "Just fine," were you? "No, of course not," you say, "I was mad. I didn't want to go to that stupid party anyway." Ah, now we are getting somewhere. Last I checked, mad is painful emotion.

How about the women in our story? This is the woman who had lived a sinful life in that town. How does she feel? Numb? Pitiful? Hopeless? Desperate? Confused?

And how does Jesus feel about the woman? Does she catch him off guard? She's a prostitute and at this party of men she goes right for Jesus. Are you surprised that she is there? Do you think that she had been there before? On this night, she falls at Jesus' feet and begins crying. Her tears fall on his feet. How does that make him feel? Compassionate? Embarrassed? Nervous? Merciful? "Oh, just fine?" Mad? Put out?

How does the host of the party – Simon the Pharisee – feel when he sees all this? Look at what the text says: "This man clearly is not prophet. If he knew who was touching him, he wouldn't allow it if he were any kind of man. This man is no prophet." Does Simon feel compassion for the poor woman? Justified in allowing her presence at the party? Powerful? Abusive? Superior? Rich?

Now, I want you to transition and consider Jesus' response in this very emotionally volatile situation? What are his options? "Well, he's cornered. My goodness, he doesn't have many options. He got caught off caught with this prostitute being at the party and well, he's in pickle." Really? ... Well, I actually see at least four options available to Jesus. ...

1. He could **fight**. And who would blame him? How many of you would have done that? Do we have any fighters here? It's true. Jesus could have stood up and said, "This is ridiculous and it's mean. This is not acceptable to me or to this woman. I feel unwelcome and set up and Mr. Simon-the-Pharisee, now that you have royally embarrassed me, you owe me an apology, and you owe it now. Both an apology to me and this woman."

Now, a few of you might have done this, but I guess most of you wouldn't have. And while I think we can argue that Jesus really does defend this woman, He did not take the put-up-your-dukes approach. Not this time.

2. Some of you might have **fled** and left the party. You would have somehow, some way, quickly made your exit. "Baby, get me out of here!" And your friends at church would have been outside the door to meet you, embrace you and say, "No one deserves to be treated like that. You did the right thing by leaving. We are very proud of you." A number of you would have done that. You would have fled, and who of us would blame you? But guess what? That's not what Jesus did. He did not flee.

3. A few of you here might have **frozen** and retreated to the land of numb. You would have stayed at the party but you would have instantly gone deeply to the land of numb. I might be one of those. Having been raised in that land, I know how to go there, and I can get there fast. And you might not even know I am there. Well, Jesus didn't freeze. Nope. He didn't go there. He didn't retreat and turn himself into a tiny ball of nothing.

4. Well, what did he do? Friends, do you think he was not aware of what was going on? A prostitute was weeping at his feet. Her tears were falling on his feet. She was wiping them with her hair. The host of the part and the muckety-mucks saw this. The tension is high. The host and the other guests were judging him as they watched this event unfold before their very eyes. Look at verse 40. Realizing what was going on emotionally and how he was being judged, Jesus said to the host: "Simon, I have something I would like to say." I imagine him saying it very calmly.

Jesus stayed totally **present** and calm, right there with a prostitute crying at his feet and with the rich business guys smugly sitting there watching him and judging him and wondering what in the world was about to happen. Jesus confidently turns to Simon the host and says, "I'd like to say something." What was Jesus at the very moment in which he decided to speak up? He then tells a story about two people with debts owed to a money lender. One owed, say, \$100,000; the other owed just about 10 bucks. Neither could repay what was owed so the money lender forgave the debt of both. Jesus then asks Simon "Which of these two will love him more?" And Simon answers correctly, "I suppose the one who was forgiven the bigger debt." That's right, says Jesus. Then Jesus recounts what Simon didn't do for him when he arrived as his guest. I wonder how Jesus is feeling toward Simon, the host. Maybe he was feeling nothing. I don't know. Jesus loved people but I take it that Jesus was not very happy nor impressed with Simon, the host of the part at what is transpiring.

He was very pleased, on the other hand, that this desperate woman had shown him love in her moment of utter desperation. Look at how Jesus handled it:

⁴⁴ Then he turned toward the woman and said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. ⁴⁵ You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. ⁴⁶ You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet. ⁴⁷ Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—as her great love has shown. But whoever has been forgiven little loves little."

Let me try to drive this home...

- When we are truly present for others and to the Lord we can begin to love our neighbor as ourselves. What might God want you to do to be more present in your life – at home, at church, and in your community?
- Have the courage to speak up in love when you know God wants you to. You have heard it before, and it's true, make "I" statements. "I feel." "I am confused." "Help me understand your perspective."

- Allow yourself to experience both positive and painful emotions.
- Determine today to never again be, “Just fine.” Remember, fine is not an emotion.
- Press in toward people, not away.