

*Pouring Out Memories*  
*Luke 7:36-50*

Some years ago, a friend of mine retired as the pastor of his church. He had been at that church for twenty years--a very long time by most standards. (Although for some of overachieving ministers, twenty years is just getting started!) The church wanted to find a very special way to thank him for his ministry, for all that he had given them. So, they came up with what they thought was a great idea. You see, he had never been to the Holy Land. And since they assumed every minister dreamed of going to the Holy Land, they thought this would be the perfect gift--to begin retirement by walking the streets of Jerusalem. Before buying the tickets, though, they decided to run it by him. They said, "Pastor Frank, we want to thank you for all you've done these twenty years. So we'd like to send you and your wife to the Holy Land." Frank, who was a very kind and diplomatic person, thought for a minute, and decided he had nothing to lose and no one to impress at this point. So he said, "Well, you know the Holy Land is very nice. But I would much rather go to the Grand Canyon."

How do you thank someone who has been your minister for so long? Someone who looked at twenty years...and said, "I'm just getting started!" Who bought another convertible and started on twenty more? Forty years of ministry. What do you get for that? The Holy Land, the Grand Canyon--a trip around the world in a hot air balloon!--it could hardly begin to express the gratitude and the awe we feel. As a newly minted minister, with barely a few weeks in circulation around here, I'm in awe of forty years. How do you thank someone for that? How do you thank God for that? It is a unusual blessing for a church and community. No matter how gifted or good a minister is, in ministry and in life there is nothing that substitutes for compound interest on the investment of time. How do you thank someone, how do you thank God, for such a gift?

In the story that Tex just read, from the gospel according to Luke, we meet a woman who can help us answer that question. We do not know her name; she is only called woman. Perhaps that's because she was known more by her reputation than by her name; she was a reputable *sinner* in the town. But we do not meet her on a street corner or a back alley; we meet her at a banquet, a big Sabbath day party at the house of Simon, a leader in the local congregation. But the woman did not receive an invitation; no, she comes secretly into the side door. And looking around the room, she sees Jesus, sitting at the head table, reclining in a big chair, enjoying his meal. The band is playing, and the guests are talking, and eating so much, that hardly anyone notices when she slips quietly through the room. She makes her way along the wall, nearly invisible in the half-light of candles, and comes up to the place of Jesus. By now she is weeping, and her tears are flowing into a steady stream that is falling upon his feet. She removes her headdress and shakes out her long hair. And using her own hair as a towel, she wipes his feet until they are clean. And, as if this weren't enough, she takes out a small, alabaster jar--her most prized possession, a vase of precious perfume. Without saying word, she bends down and pours the perfume on his feet, and blesses them with a kiss.

What could prompt such extravagance--such extravagant humiliation? To crash the party of a prominent man, and bathe his guest with her tears. And then take the most precious thing she owned, and pour it out like water on his feet. Simon thought it was repulsive. He looked down on her, and he scolded Jesus. But Jesus saw something Simon didn't see--he saw to the woman's heart, the depth gratitude and love. He said to Simon, Simon you can't understand what she was doing because you love too little, and you love too little because you've been forgiven too little. But this woman, this town sinner, she has been forgiven much, and so she loves very much.

When Jesus' had explained to Simon the woman's crazy act of love, he blessed her and sent her away in peace. To part in peace--to express the love and gratitude that is in our hearts and to part in peace--that is a gift from God. What can we learn from this woman? She took the most precious thing she had, and in love she poured it out in the presence of God. We can do that. In the few years I've known this congregation, I have come to know that you know the truth about all of us: we are forgiven much--are therefore we love very much. And, I've come to realize that we too possess a precious treasure--we hold in these fragile hearts and minds the memories of years together. In particular, on this day we recall four decades of life together: a youth group and a retreat at the shore; a couples club and dinner with friends; a wedding--and then a baptism--and two decades later another wedding; counseling, and healing, and new life; mission trips and work-days and a pit stop for parents on Halloween; visits from old friends and new, guests from around the world; Christmas and Easter, and dozens of summer picnics. Life and ministry and love and worship mingling together, and it all comes pouring out in a steady stream of memories--a stream that would fill the Grand Canyon--and that makes this land Holy.

In a moment, the choir will sing a poem written by Pamela Martin. She offers to us, in her own words, the wisdom of Ecclesiastes: to everything a season, to everything a time... a time for turning. We have come to a turn in the road: after so many years of traveling together, now our paths go different ways. As we prepare to part, may the memories we pour out be holy in God's sight and in ours, a precious gift of gratitude from hearts that are full of love. And may we go in peace.

Rev. Patrick Johnson  
Frenchtown Presbyterian Church  
Frenchtown, New Jersey  
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The Farewell Service for Rev. William O. "Tex" Culton