

18 March 2026
Lent 4 Midweek

Saint Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

Jesu Juva

“Icons of Repentance: The ~~Sinful~~ *Forgiven* Woman - The Fruit of Repentance”

Text: Hosea 6:1-6; 1 John 4:7-12, 17-19; Luke 7:36-50

In the Name of (+) Jesus. Amen.

The story we heard in the Holy Gospel today is often misinterpreted and misunderstood.

When Jesus says: ***Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven—for she loved much***, some interpret and understand that to mean that her sins are forgiven *because* she loved much. That her love was the cause of her forgiveness. First love, then forgiveness. And if you just read that verse by itself, out of context, it *could* mean that.

But within the context of the whole story, no. The parable Jesus told makes that perfectly clear. The one who has the larger debt *cancelled*, the one who is forgiven much, loves much. According to Jesus: Forgiveness first, then love. And Jesus told that parable because Simon the Pharisee was judging her. And Him. Simon the Pharisee knew her past. Simon the Pharisee knew her as ***a sinful woman***. But Jesus knew her quite differently. To Him, she was not a *sinful* woman, but a *forgiven* woman. A woman who had been forgiven much and so now, as a result, was shedding *tears of joy* upon the feet of the one who had come to provide and accomplish that very forgiveness. Cast out by the world but welcomed by Jesus changed her. ***Her faith had saved her***. And her love showed that salvation.

Her love was the fruit of her repentance and forgiveness. The fruit God desires. Forgiveness isn't the end or goal of the Christian life, but its cause. It's not what we're working *toward*, it's what we have received and are living *from*. Which makes this *forgiven* woman our fourth *Icon of Repentance*, as she shows us and teaches us **the fruit of repentance**.

Now, we aren't told exactly what this woman had done that made her a known sinner, or as she is called, ***a woman of the city***. But I can guess. And it is what makes the reading from the prophet Hosea tonight perfect - because really, *it is the same story*.

Here's how it goes: God told the prophet Hosea to marry *a wife of whoredom* (Hosea

1:2), a prostitute, as a living example of God's relationship with Israel. For Israel was being an unfaithful wife to Him and committing spiritual adultery by worshiping false gods. And there are consequences for that. So God sent prophet after prophet to call Israel back, to call Israel to repentance, to faithfulness - Hosea was just the latest one. *But they would not.* Therefore, there would be a time of punishment and discipline for His people. But then God promised restoration. Though Israel was unfaithful to Him, the Lord remained faithful to her. And that is where our reading from Hosea for tonight picks up. With Hosea pleading with them . . .

***Come, let us return to the Lord;
for he has torn us, that he may heal us;
he has struck us down, and he will bind us up.***

There is the punishment and discipline, the ***tearing*** and ***striking down***, which were to ***heal*** Israel, and to lead to their ***binding up***; a promised restoration. Which Hosea then reveals further in this nugget:

***After two days he will revive us;
on the third day he will raise us up,
that we may live before him.***

That's the restoration God promises - and not just for Israel of old, but for the *new* Israel, the *true* Israel, the Church. For that restoration will happen ***on the third day*** - the day of Jesus' death and His resurrection. After He - faithfully! - takes all of our sin and unfaithfulness upon Himself on the cross and atones for it.

For notice the plurals . . . He will raise **US** up. Jesus' resurrection wasn't just for life for Himself, but for all people. And for this: that we may ***live before Him*** in righteousness and purity forever. A life that starts for us with our own death and resurrection in Baptism. When by water and the Word we are joined to Christ and die and rise with Him to live a new life. Which again means that forgiveness isn't the end or goal of the Christian life - that once we're forgiven we can relax and do nothing. No! Forgiveness is the *cause*, the *source*, of our Christian life. Which Hosea goes on to speak say . . .

***He will come to us as the showers,
as the spring rains that water the earth.***

For what happens after rains come and water the earth? Growth! That's God's intention and why He sends the rains that water the earth. And why the water that comes down on us in Baptism. That we grow. That we live ***in*** Him and ***like*** Him more and more. Israel's problem was that - as Hosea says - their love wasn't growing from

the rain, but disappearing *like a morning cloud*, like the morning mist, and drying up like *the morning dew*. And maybe that happens for us sometimes, too.

That's why God sent the prophets like Hosea, to slay them with the words of their mouth. To call them to repentance, to turn from the way they were living to live the new life God gave to them. Producing the fruit of repentance, the good fruit of a new life. As Hosea then goes on to say:

***For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice,
the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.***

That is, God doesn't just want people going through the motions of sacrifice and burnt offerings - or today, perhaps we could say, just showing up in church. His desire for us is that we live in and from His *steadfast love* and in and from *the knowledge of Him*.

Now that word there, *steadfast love*, is an important word. In Hebrew, it is the word *hesed*. It's kind of the Hebrew equivalent for the Greek word for love you may have heard of before: *agape*. Greek has a few different words for love, but *agape* love is *God's* love; God's selfless, self-sacrificing, all in, love. The "for God so loved the world" love. Jesus on the cross love.

That's the love God's desires from us. *But how in the world are we supposed to do that?* Well, we can't. Not on our own. No matter how you try, you can't do that kind of love yourself. But you *can* if you first receive it *from* God. Then you can live it and give it to others. So we do. We first receive that love when we are baptized and are raised in forgiveness to a new life. But then continue to receive it in Absolution and the Gospel and the Supper. We begin to live a new life of love. Love toward God and love toward our neighbor. Love that is *the fruit of repentance*.

Which is what John also wrote of in the Epistle we heard tonight. Notice how he captures all of this so simply! ***Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God*** - that's baptism! Our new birth by water and the Word.

And what is that love? That *steadfast love*, *agape* love? John goes on to say: ***In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him***. That's the "for God so loved the world" love. Jesus on the cross love. Given to give us new life in Him.

And then John caps it off: ***We love because he first loved us***. So, ***Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another***.

That is exactly what we heard in the Gospel. The once-sinful-but-now-forgiven woman did that, lived that love. What she received, she gave. Simon the Pharisee did not. He could not give what he had not received. She knew how great her debt, so she knew how great her forgiveness. And great forgiveness begets great love. Love that is the fruit of repentance. The fruit of the new resurrected life we have in Jesus.

Now, we know how God manifested that love for us: ***in sending His Son to be the sacrifice for our sins***. So how is that *steadfast love of the Lord* to be manifested in *your* life? In the same way. In you laying down your life for others. As Paul says in Romans, as a *living* sacrifice (Romans 12:1). Laying down your life for your spouse and children, your friends and neighbors, your co-workers and classmates. They need that steadfast love just as you do.

But if you find that you're not doing that, that your love for others has failed, you're not alone. You're not the only one. A quick look around and that's pretty obvious! But don't be like Israel of old! Heed the call of God's apostles, prophets, and pastors - repent of that, and receive the love and forgiveness you need. Fill your tank with His *steadfast love*, be renewed by Jesus, raised up and lifted up again by Jesus, and then you will have what you need for others. To live the life that God desires for you.

Did you hear that? I'm going to repeat it just to make sure: the life God desire for you. Not just from you! But the life God desires for you. For the life of love and forgiveness you live isn't just good for others, it's good for you. It is the good life He has always desired and planned for you - a life of peace and joy.

And so our fourth *Icon of Repentance*: the *forgiven* woman and the fruit of repentance. This woman who shows us how to live. Who shows us there is no debt too great for Jesus' forgiveness. And that *the greater the forgiveness, the greater the love*.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.