

**"GOOD NEWS FOR BROKEN HEARTS"**

**A Sermon By**

**Philip A. C. Clarke**

**Park Avenue United Methodist Church  
106 East 86th Street  
New York, New York 10028  
June 11, 1995**

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### INTRODUCTION

A woman went to see a psychiatrist because she was terribly depressed. In probing through her emotions, the therapist discovered that this woman had never really worked her way through the death of her husband many years before. The woman's husband had died the week after the assassination of President Kennedy. She had watched with great admiration how well Jackie Kennedy handled the shock and the trauma of her husband's death, and when her own husband died, she made up her mind to be just as composed and just as calm and just as brave...saying to herself, "If Jackie Kenney can do it, so can I."

She failed to realize that Jackie Kennedy on television was not Jackie Kennedy behind the scenes....sharing her heartbreak with her family and with her friends. So that woman's grief ...her feelings of loss....all remained repressed because she never let herself express what she was really feeling on the inside.

### DEVELOPMENT

All of us have seen enough of life to have experienced at some time and some point a "breaking heart". Have you ever let go and just let those tears fall without regard for what others might think? Tears have a purpose and as someone has said, "They wash the eyes and we see much better".

Luke, in today's scripture, introduces us to a woman who shed some tears. He tells us about a woman whose heart was just "breaking" in two. Now some of you may be short on your sympathy for this woman. After all, we're told she was a "woman of the city...." which implies she was a bit of a sinner. You could tell it by the way she dressed, by the way she made herself up, perhaps even by the way she walked and talked. In other words, she was not decent company for the decent folks in town. Her place was out on the streets...and certainly not in the house of a Pharisee. Yet, here she was...KNEELING at the very feet of Jesus...weeping and watering His feet with her tears and then using her long hair to wipe them dry. Kissing His feet and anointing them with ointment.

Somewhat a tacky and pathetic display of emotion. After all, good people just don't get carried away like this...do they? And now if Jesus really were a prophet, thought this Pharisee who was playing "host" to Him that day, He would recognize this woman for what she was and He wouldn't allow her to come close... much less kiss His feet. But, Jesus made no effort to stop this woman even though He must have sensed His host's discomfort and displeasure. So, we ask: what's going on here...in this spectacular show of remorse and affection?

### ONLY JESUS COULD SEE THIS WOMAN'S HEART

First of all, perhaps it's because only Jesus could really see into this woman's heart. Only He knew what she was really feeling. Only He knew what had brought her to this place...drawn her into this scene.

There's a book entitled, Healing For Damaged Emotions, where the author, David Seamonds talks about people who have scars that nobody else can see. And he uses the beautiful analogy of those giant sequoia and redwood trees out west.

"In most of the parks" he says...."the naturalists can show you a cross section of a great tree they have cut, and point out that the rings of the tree reveal the developmental history...year by year...."

He goes on to say,

"Here's a ring that represents a year when there was a terrible drought. Here are a couple of rings from years when there was too much rain. Here's where the tree was struck by lightning. Here are some normal years of growth. This ring shows a fore fire that almost destroyed the tree. Here's another of savage blight and disease. All of this lies embedded in the heart of the tree....representing the autobiography of its growth."

Let me read some more...for his insights are helpful.

"And that's the way it is with us. Just a few minutes beneath the protective bark, the concealing, protective mask, are the recorded rings of our lives. There are scars of ancient, painful hearts...as when a little boy rushed downstairs on Christmas morning and found a dirty old rock in his Christmas stocking...put there to punish him for some trivial boyhood naughtiness. This scar has eaten away in him...causing all kinds of interpersonal difficulties.

Here is the discoloration of a tragic stain that muddied all of life....as years behind the barn, or in the haystack, or out in the wood, a big brother took a little sister and introduced her into the mysteries...no, the miseries of sex.

And here we see the pressure of a painful, repressed memory, of running after an alcoholic father who was about to kill the mother, and then of rushing for the butcher knife. Such scars have been buried in pain for so long that they are causing hurt and rage that are inexplicable. And these scars are not touched by conversion and sanctifying grace, or by the ordinary benefits of prayer.

In the rings of our thoughts and our emotions, the record is there....the memories are recorded, and all are alive. And they directly and deeply affect our concepts, our feelings and our relationships. They affect the way we look at life and God...at others and also at ourselves."

I think...if we could look into the heart of this woman kneeling now in front of Jesus, we might not be so harsh in our judgement of her. What brought her to such a wretched position in life? Was she abused as a child? Many women "of the street" even to this day were abused as children...denied an opportunity to develop a wholesome sexuality because of crimes committed against them before they were really old enough to understand. Was she estranged from her family? Probably. Was she in great emotional pain because of her life of "sin"? Undoubtedly. And maybe...just maybe...this is the first reason that Jesus makes no effort to stop her. Only He can see her heart.

ONLY JESUS COULD SEE GOD'S HEART

only Jesus could see God's heart. Think about this.

But there may be another reason at work, at play here...so let's move on. Secondly,

There are many Christians who still carry along with them the Old Testament view of God. To them, God is a God of judgement - of wrath and of vengeance. As far as these Christians are concerned, Jesus need not ever have come. For they will not listen to Him. They find it difficult to heed His whisper and His example of love and of grace and of acceptance and of forgiveness. They haven't turned the page from the Old Testament view of God to the New Testament page.

Many of you are familiar with the writings of Maxie Dunnam. He shares a powerful story that comes from a novel by Alan Paton, the great South African writer. In this story which takes place before the recent changes in South Africa, a white police lieutenant has secretly been carrying on an affair with a black African woman. In South Africa that was against the law in every way. Not only was it against the civil law, but in that st n, racist society, it was an unforgiveable sin.

The lieutenant is confronted with the charge by his captain. At first the lieutenant denies the charge, but the evidence is so overwhelming that he finally confesses. The captain then does what might appear to be a strange thing...he goes to visit the lieutenant's father and shares with him his son's transgression. In a deeply moving and tragic scene the father asks the captain,

"Is it true?" The captain replies, "I fear it is true."  
The father insists, "Are you certain...are you sure?"  
The captain replies, "Sir...he confessed to me...yes,  
it is true."

Silence. The only sound is the sound of the father's deep breathing. It sounds like the breathing of some creature in agonizing pain. In the room observing the scene are the lieutenant's mother and his aunt...his father's sister. The father turns to his sister and says, "Bring me the Book." She goes over to the bookcase and pulls down the heavy family Bible, takes it over to the father, and sets it down before him on the table. She wonders what passage he is going to read, but he doesn't read any passage at all.

Instead he opens the Bible to the front page where family names have been carefully recorded for 175 years. He takes his pen and some ink and proceeds to cross out the name of his son, Pieter Van Vlaanderen - not once, but many times as though to completely obliterate it from the list of those many names.

Without any anger or despair...at least that was visible....and without words, he does that dramatic task. Then he turns to the captain and very calmly asks,

"Is there anything more.....?"

The captain knows that this is his cue to leave and house and he does, offering to the mother any kind of help that he might be able to afford. But the father turns abruptly to him and says in a loud voice, "No one in this house will ask for help". And so the captain leaves. Then the father, still sitting at the table, turns to his sister and says,

"Lock the door....bolt it securely...and bring me the key.  
The door of our house will never open again....."

That's the scene. The door is closed forever. The son can never return home.

Now, for some Christians this story may present no problem. The son had sinned and therefore, he must be punished. For such people, it's as if Jesus had never told the Story of the Prodigal Son. We can excuse the Pharisee's attitude toward this woman kneeling at the feet of Jesus...wiping His feet with her tears. He, of course, was simply reflecting the influence of the Law by which he lived and by which he had been reared. But you and I know...hopefully....know better. We know that in the family of God the "prodigal" can always come home, that the door is never locked. Why? Because Jesus showed us the heart of God. With His own blood...shed for all...He was showing us how much God cares about the lost, the lonely, the sinner. Only Jesus could see this woman's heart. Only Jesus could see the heart of God. But let's move on to one more thing and that is the only Jesus can forgive sins.

ONLY JESUS CAN FORGIVE SINS

Yes, there is forgiveness and perhaps there is someone in the congregation this morning who needs to hear this word. Forgiveness. A chance to start over. There is "ONE" who cares, forgives, heals, helps and makes whole.

Before the Reformation, Martin Luther was in his monk's cell weeping because of his sins. The story goes that his confessor, a young man, simply didn't know what to do, what to say...and so he began reciting the Apostles' Creed.

"I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and Earth...and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, Our Lord, Who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary....and son on.....from thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead. I believe in the Holy Ghost; the Holy Catholic Church; the communion of Saints; the forgiveness of sin....the...."

"WAIT"...Luther interrupted his confessor. "Say that again, please..." "What do you mean...what did I say?" asked the young man. "That last part...what was it again?" "Oh that". I said, "I believe in the forgiveness of sins."

"The forgiveness of sins" Luther said as if savoring each word. "The forgiveness of sins. Then there is hope for me somewhere. Then maybe there is a way to God".

There is a way to God. Jesus has opened up that way for us. Follow Him. We may not be a woman of the city...but there are sins that break our hearts as well. And there is ONE who sees those broken hearts. There is ONE who cares and who forgives...who heals and who makes whole again.

An evangelist was once witnessing among the hurting and destitute people of a certain city. He read to them this story from Luke's Gospel of the woman who wiped the feet of Jesus with her tears. While he was reading he heard a loud sobbing sound and looked up into the face of a young, thin girl whose face was badly disfigured by small pox. After he spoke a few words of encouragement to her, she said:

"Will He ever come again...the One who forgave that woman?  
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There's something in this story of the woman with the broken heart that touches all of us...and strikes something of a universal chord. I think we all want to believe that someone understands how we got to this point in life. We all want to believe that there is a merciful and a just God whose very nature and essence is Love. We all want to believe that our sins and our selfishness can be forgiven. And God who has drawn close to us in Jesus gives us that touch of assurance. It's there for us and is ours as we open our hearts to Him.

PRAYER

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PRAYER

Make us sensitive to Your presence and to Your nearness in these moments, O God. Melt us...mold us...heal us...help us.... and bring comfort where hearts are hurting.....let the "GOOD NEWS" of this scripture lesson lead us on. This we ask in the name and spirit of Christ. Amen.