

A Gospel People

GRACE

How much are you loved?

Little Nutbrown Hare, who was going to bed, held on tight to Big Nutbrown Hare's very long ears. He wanted to be sure that Big Nutbrown Hare was listening. "Guess how much I love you," he said. "Oh, I don't think I could guess that," said Big Nutbrown Hare. "This much," said Little Nutbrown Hare, stretching out his arms as wide as they could go. Big Nutbrown Hare had even longer arms. "But I love YOU this much," he said. Hmm, that is a lot, thought Little Nutbrown Hare. "I love you as high as I can reach," said Little Nutbrown Hare. "I love you as high as I can reach," said Big Nutbrown Hare. That is quite high, thought Little Nutbrown Hare. I wish I had arms like that.

Then Little Nutbrown Hare had a good idea. He tumbled upside down and reached up the tree trunk with his feet. "I love you all the way up to my toes!" he said. "And I love you all the way up to your toes," said Big Nutbrown Hare, swinging him up over his head. "I love you as high as I can HOP!" laughed Little Nutbrown Hare, bouncing up and down. "But I love you as high as I can hop," smiled Big Nutbrown Hare – and he hopped so high that his ears touched the branches above. That's good hopping, thought Little Nutbrown Hare. I wish I could hop like that.

"I love you all the way down the lane as far as the river," cried Little Nutbrown Hare. "I love you across the river and over the hills," said Big Nutbrown Hare. That's very far, thought Little Nutbrown Hare. He was almost too sleepy to think any more. Then he looked beyond the thorn bushes, out into the big dark night. Nothing could be further than the sky. "I love you right up to the MOON," he said, and closed his eyes. "Oh, that's far said Big Nutbrown Hare. "That is very, very far."

Big Nutbrown Hare settled Little Nutbrown Hare into his bed of leaves. He leaned over and kissed him good night. Then he lay down close by and whispered with a smile, "I love you right up to the moon – AND BACK."¹

How much are you loved? More than you will ever know or imagine. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only son." How much are you loved? Aren't you glad this verse doesn't say: For God so loved; the rich; the clever; the healthy; those who have it all together; the English; the African; those who have a job; the old the young...Aren't you glad it says: "For God so loved the world!" Are you in the world? Then you are included in God's love. How much are you loved? More than you will ever know or imagine. He loves you because he loves you

When we know we are loved, then we can love. Here's a challenge: you can't give what you do not have. Our value of Grace says: "We will be motivated by God's free gift of love in all that we do." But here's the challenge: you can't give what you do not have. How much are you loved? Here's a shocking story, as I read it ask yourself this question: "Who am I in this story?"

Now one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him, so he went to the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table. When a woman who had lived a sinful life in that town learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's house, she brought an alabaster jar of perfume, and 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. 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.' Jesus answered him, "Simon, I have something to tell you." "Tell me, teacher," he said. "Two men owed money to a certain money-lender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he cancelled the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?" Simon replied, "I suppose the one who had the bigger debt cancelled." "You have judged correctly," Jesus said. Then he turned towards 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. You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet. Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven - for she loved much. But he who has been forgiven little loves little.” Then Jesus said to her, “your sins are forgiven.” The other guests began to say among themselves, “Who is this who even forgives sin?” Jesus said to the woman, “Yours faith has saved you; go in peace.” Luke 7: 36-50.

Jesus had been invited to the house of a religious leader for dinner. A visiting rabbi – as Jesus was – would be a great honour at such a dinner. Certain rules of etiquette would have been expected and taken for granted. The customary greeting was a kiss. To neglect this ritual was tantamount to ignoring the guest. The washing of feet was mandatory before eating a meal, either the host or a servant would do it – depending on the importance of the guest. A thoughtful host would provide anointing oil too, but Jesus, the invited guest, receives nothing. This amounts to a deliberate slap in the face – and everyone present knows it!

These kinds of banquets were really quite public affairs and people were allowed to gather in the courtyard to watch and listen. A woman is present – probably a prostitute. Everyone present knows who she is and what she does. She’s there because something has attracted her to Jesus..... something he’s said or done, or the way he is with people. Something has touched her heart. It has caused her to reflect on how she got to where she is at that moment. We know nothing of her background but prostitutes were usually slaves who had either been captured in war or abandoned as infants and had been raised to be part of the sex trade. She’s had a very tough life – and most of it, probably none of it, is her fault. But for sure she knows what it is to be despised, unwelcome, unloved, rejected, ignored, treated with contempt, to be the object others use. No decent person would speak to her, or welcome her, or acknowledge her. Doors only open at night ... in secret and in shame.

But ... but.... she’s heard Jesus teach and she’s beginning to realise that she is loved by God! He thinks of her and longs for her as if she were his own

daughter. So she gathers all her courage and she comes to stand in the courtyard to watch and to listen. She is overwhelmed by the idea of God's love for her..... her!! There she watches how Simon treats Jesus and she can't stand it! So she decides to act, and act before she loses her nerve. Imagine the drama: Jesus, reclining, eating ... and suddenly a woman from the courtyard standing at his feet. Everyone is watching! She kneels to kiss his feet – so that someone might greet him, welcome him. She looks up at Jesus' face – into his eyes and instead of lust and condemnation – she sees love.

Tears well up in her eyes and begin to fall, tears of sadness for what she's done; tears of gratitude because of the offer of forgiveness; tears of joy for a whole new life that lies ahead. She can't ask for a towel to dry Jesus' feet – Simon would never give her one - so she lets her hair down. A woman always wears her hair up in public. She never allows it to hang down in mixed company, it is considered too provocative for men and if done in the company of anyone but her husband it is grounds for divorce. Everyone watching knows her profession. She's let her hair down many times before, but... this time... the final time... she's got it right. She wipes Jesus feet. She has ointment which she pours over Jesus feet – she will not need it anymore after this. She pours her old life away. She is so broken and undone by the sheer goodness of his love that she seems to have forgotten who she is and where she is. Simon is watching.

We don't know why he treated Jesus so badly but Jesus seems to know what he is thinking so he tells him a story and then asks him a question. The equivalent story today might be of two guys in debt to a bookie – both of whom gambled their way into debt. Neither would ever be able to pay his debt, but one man's debt was so large it was huge compared to the other mans. The only difference between them is that the guy with the bigger debt knows he is desperate when the bookie calls them to account. But the bookie extraordinarily cancels both men's debt. Jesus asks Simon: "who do you suppose is going to have his world turned upside down? Which one will be filled with relief, gratitude and joy?" Simon is reluctant to answer. "I suppose the guy with the big debt." Jesus says: "You got that right." This was shocking to everyone present. It challenged everything that was going on. It turned everything they thought upside down,

those they thought had the greatest capacity to love...in fact did not! In fact, Jesus said, it's the people you think have the least capacity to love are those with the greatest capacity to love. And friends, perhaps that comes as a shock to us too! In truth, how great is your capacity to love?

Grace: "We will be motivated by God's free gift of love in all that we do." You can't give what you don't have. The people watching Jesus – the invited guests for sure – thought that those who had done everything right – lived right – they were the ones who loved. They thought the ones who had their theology right – which of course was themselves – were the ones who loved. Jesus challenged that, and the woman showed, that it is, in fact, not true! Jesus had some harsh words for Simon. "You gave me nothing! But this woman..." What was the difference between Simon and the woman? Simon perceived himself only to need a little grace after all ... he had done everything right. And his debt, if there was one, was small. But the woman recognised she needed a huge amount of grace for her debt was large and it was she who was able to receive unconditional love, overwhelming love that changed her heart and her life.

The truth here is, of course, that Simon needed no more or less grace than the woman but: his lips wouldn't kiss; his knee wouldn't bend; his eyes wouldn't weep; his hands wouldn't serve; his perfume never left the jar.

How about you? "We will be motivated by God's free gift of love in all that we do." What shocks me is that I see so much of myself in Simon. I've done pretty much everything the right way – there are no skeletons in my cupboard, and I can very easily think that I help God because I need only a little grace. I can be, and am often, harsh and judgemental, unforgiving and unloving. After all – there are a whole bunch of people who need a lot more grace than I do. But this story challenges me to the core – and tells me I am so wrong. It tells me I need to receive unconditional and overwhelming love and huge amounts of grace. I need

it just as much as you do, and it challenges me that if I don't receive it – I am going to find it very hard to give it to others.

How do you suppose this woman lived the rest of her life? Friends, Jesus is present this morning by the power of the Holy Spirit just as he was at that meal, who are you in the story – today – right now. What will your response be? Last Sunday evening as we prayed, Hosea 10v12 was read: “break up your unploughed ground.” For some of us this is our challenge right now. Unploughed ground becomes hard and unreceptive to anything that falls on it. Some of us here know we have hard hearts – we have become unreceptive and unloving and in truth you need to receive again the unconditional, overwhelming love of God in your heart. You will be welcomed.

For some of us the challenge is to see ourselves the way God sees us – his sons or daughters who have always been on his mind. Some of us think we need too much grace and that God simply cannot like us let alone love us. This story shows that simply isn't true. You are loved more than you can ever know – and God's grace doesn't come to an end - or at least no-one yet has ever found the end of it.

“We will be motivated by God's free gift of love in all that we do.” Friends, we will not be able to do that if we do not grasp the scandal of grace which is the shocking truth of this story. And without its truth we will not be able to live out our value of grace because we simply cannot give what we don't have.

1. McBratney S and Jeram J: *“Guess How Much I Love You”*, Walker Books 1994

