

Sermon 6-13-10 Luke 7:36-8:3

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One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and took his place at the table. 37 And a woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. 38 She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment. 39 Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him—that she is a sinner." 40 Jesus spoke up and said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." "Teacher," he replied, "speak." 41 "A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. 42 When they could not pay, he canceled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?" 43 Simon answered, "I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt." And Jesus said to him, "You have judged rightly." 44 Then turning toward the woman, he said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. 45 You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. 46 You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. 47 Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little." 48 Then he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." 49 But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?" 50 And he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

8:1 Soon afterwards he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, 2 as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, 3 and Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their resources.

When I was in the fifth grade, I had trouble seeing the blackboard and my parents took me to an ophthalmologist who said that I was nearsighted and he tested and fitted me for my first pair of glasses. I distinctly remember that day I walked out of that office with my new glasses on. It was like I was seeing the world for the first time. I was amazed that I could now make out details that previously were only a blur. I truly was seeing the world in a whole new way.

It makes such a difference for us when we can see clearly. Yet, what often becomes problematic for us is when we think that we're seeing clearly, but we're not. Each of us has our own perceptions and experiences that color just how we see things, and how we judge and characterize others.

Today in our gospel text we find Jesus interacting with two other characters, a man and a woman, one enslaved to his particular way of seeing the world, scrutinizing and categorizing. While the other one exhibits her freedom in an uninhibited display of emotion and love. To some degree we could say that one animates the law and the other the gospel, as long as we don't fall into the trap of nearsighted categorization ourselves.

Simon invites Jesus to dine with him, but what he might have overlooked upon issuing his invitation is that Jesus cannot be domesticated. Jesus doesn't follow the prescribed notions of social acceptability. So hold on tight Simon, this is one dinner party that has the potential to turn your world upside down.

What happens next is downright scandalous, particularly in light of the social norms of the day. A woman slips in off the street washes Jesus feet with her tears, dries them with her hair, kisses them and anoints them with myrrh. In Simon's mind that larger scandal might not be the woman's behavior as much as Jesus just sitting there, allowing her to do it. If he had any sense of honor and decency, he would surely have shooed this sinful woman off, like one shoos off a pesky gnat or fly. Simon then begins to question Jesus' prophetic abilities in just allowing this woman's outrageous display of affection towards him. Doesn't he realize that she's a sinner?

Jesus says to Simon that he has something to say to him, and Simon, calling him teacher, invites him to speak. Jesus then uses a story in this teachable moment to confront Simon with his own sinful ways of categorizing the world. Simon listens to Jesus story about the two debtors unable to pay and their debts being forgiven, and he answers Jesus' question correctly about which one will love the gracious creditor more. Then Jesus applies the story to what has just taken place in Simon's home, beginning with a question: Do you see this woman?

I don't think that this was just a surface level question, asking Simon if he could see that she was physically present. Jesus question is meant to give Simon and us all new eyes with which to see one another. It's a way of seeing that goes beyond our reflexive categorizing. Do you see this woman? Do you see this man? Not do you see this loser, this republican, this democrat, this brain, this fool, this friend, this foe, this liberal, this conservative, this immigrant, this terrorist, this dumb blonde, this celebrity, this nobody, this saint, this sinner? Do you see this person? - This one who is your brother or sister in the human family.

My grandfather grew up Protestant in Northern Ireland, and because of early conditioning in a nation embroiled in conflict, throughout much of his life he harbored suspicion and prejudice against Roman Catholics. Retired, and living alone in Florida, his Roman Catholic next-door neighbors would occasionally have him over for supper. When he said something derogatory about Catholics my dad would say, "What about Pat and Chris," and he would say, "Oh, but they're different." He had gotten to see them differently, because he got to know them as hospitable people, which I think might have begun to breakdown his blanket derogatory categorization of Roman Catholics. Later, as he neared the end of his life, when his granddaughter, my sister, married a Roman Catholic boy, I remember him being nothing but smiles.

The more we really get to know someone, the more we realize that they don't quite fit into our former categories.

Simon had called Jesus "teacher", Jesus tells him to look closely at this woman. She too can be your teacher. She can teach you about being forgiven. She can teach you about receiving grace. She can teach you about love and hospitality. However, it begins by seeing her first as an individual, a person, a woman, rather than as "a sinner".

Do you see this woman in our lesson today? She is our teacher too. Can you grasp the depth of her gratefulness at being forgiven as she washes Jesus feet with her tears and dries them with her hair? Can you comprehend her love of Jesus as you see her kissing his feet and massaging them with ointment? Today, she teaches us what it's like to fall off the cliff of trying to live up to our own or other's expectations and into God's loving arms. Today, she teaches us what it's like to give up our striving after security, affection and control, freed to live in each given moment by God's grace. Today, she's like a window for us into God's forgiving love and grace. Today, Jesus invites us, and all the Simon-like character that is within us, to follow this woman into a tear-bathing, foot-kissing spectacle. Look close. Do you see this woman? She has something to teach you about how precious God's gift of forgiveness truly is!

Today, it's not Simon, but Jesus who invites us to his table. He has prepared for us a feast of forgiveness, his own body and blood poured out to reverse the flow of violence in the world. In this meal we hear him pray, "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do," and we realize that it's a prayer for us. Many times I've seen tears at this table, and on more than one occasion, they have been my own-cleansing tears of healing, tears of gratitude for the priceless gift of forgiveness.

Jesus teaches us at this table that we all are precious, and there is much more to each of us than any dismissive category can contain. Here at this table, Jesus passes out new pairs of glasses allowing us to see all others and ourselves not as sinners, but as forgiven sinners. Here he instills in us a new vision of justice and equity, and sends us forth to begin living it out.

Can you imagine a whole congregation of people on fire with the intensity of love this woman expresses? Can you imagine a community practicing the level of hospitality that this woman shows to Jesus to any and every person who enters their midst, and then also turning such love outward seeking justice and equity in all the world? Today, Jesus' teachable moment for Simon, becomes in us a life-changing event. Do you see this woman? Lord, make our vision even clearer than 20/20!