

³⁶When one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him, he went to the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table. ³⁷A woman in that town who lived a sinful life learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's house, so she came there with an alabaster jar of perfume. ³⁸As 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.

³⁹When 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."

⁴⁰Jesus answered him, "Simon, I have something to tell you."

"Tell me, teacher," he said.

⁴¹"Two people owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii, ^[c]and the other fifty. ⁴²Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he forgave the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?"

⁴³Simon replied, "I suppose the one who had the bigger debt forgiven."

"You have judged correctly," Jesus said.

⁴⁴Then he turned toward 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. ⁴⁵You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. ⁴⁶You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet. ⁴⁷Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—as her great love has shown. But whoever has been forgiven little loves little."

⁴⁸Then Jesus said to her, "Your sins are forgiven."

⁴⁹The other guests began to say among themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?"

⁵⁰Jesus said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

Six year old Taylor asked his grandmother: "Am I a child of God?"

"Why, of course you are, Taylor," she replied. He looked puzzled, then responded, "Well I better get home and tell Mom and Dad--they think I'm *theirs*!" Clearly it was a case of mistaken identity!

Once there were two NBA players with the same name. Eddie Arnett Johnson and “Fast” Eddie Lee Johnson. The problem came when “Fast Eddie” was arrested in 2006 and charged (and later convicted) of sexual assault and burglary. The problem? The news media, in reporting the story did not adequately check their facts. They reported that it was Eddie Arnett Johnson who was so charged. Not so. This created a media nightmare and a credibility problem for Eddie Arnett Johnson, who had to go to considerable lengths to clear his name and separate himself from this other individual with whom reporters got him confused.

Luke tells a multi-layered story. One might say it too is about “mistaken identity”. Similar stories appear in each of the Gospels and it is tempting to conflate them into one, however Luke’s version of the dinner party at Simon the Pharisee’s house is unique. It stands alone.

Let me set the scene: Simon is a Pharisee. The Pharisees were a separatist group within the Jewish religion, in that they wanted little to do with non-Jews. These laymen were devoted to knowing, keeping and promoting both the written law and the oral law, and in the process they developed many nuanced interpretations of the commandments.

They are meticulous about keeping the Law, the Torah. They take this legalism to great lengths. For instance, the fourth commandment says: “Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy.” To be sure NOT to offend or break this commandment the Pharisees sought to clarify the definition of work, so that one would know what NOT to do on the Sabbath. They decided that one could only walk 1,000 yards, because that is the distance from the Holy of Holies to the nearest habitation. That became the standard for a Sabbath day’s journey; any further, and one broke the commandment! Their focus is on the letter of the law, (not the spirit of the law.)

This amplification of the law became so detailed that they often lost sight of the main thing: To love God with all one’s heart, mind, and strength, and to love one’s neighbor as oneself!

I can only imagine that spending much time with Pharisees would be a joyless experience! It’s hard to be around someone who is always “right”, and therefore

self-righteous. But Jesus is no respecter of persons; he gladly spends time with all kinds of people, and so he accepts this invitation to Simon's dinner party.

Simon would not receive the middle eastern Martha Stewart seal of approval for hospitality! Why? He failed miserably to meet the minimal standards of hospitality: A basin of water and a towel for the washing of feet, some scented oil for anointing (to freshen things up) and a kiss of welcome (a warm handshake today). He gets an "F" for failure as host! (Which makes one wonder why he invited Jesus in the first place!)

To further set the scene, guests recline on pillows around a low table. They support themselves on their left elbows, eat with their right hands, and their feet are extended away from the table. (If pictured from above, the guests are arranged like spokes on a wheel, around the table.) The table is centrally situated in the room, or courtyard. It was not uncommon that when rabbis were invited guests, the general public might come and stand around the periphery of the room in order to hear whatever pearls of wisdom might fall from the lips of the great teacher. Therefore, it is not correct to say that this woman is an "uninvited guest". She's in the SRO section! (Standing Room Only)

Jesus picks up on Simon's unspoken thoughts. He need not speak them aloud because I can imagine Simon's body language says it all: His reaction is guarded at first, but as the unnamed woman steps forward and approaches Jesus, Simon recoils. His face registers a look of total disgust and disbelief; disgust because of her reputation, and disbelief because of her actions. Simon is repulsed by her tears, and scandalized by her anointing and kissing Jesus' feet, and wiping them with her hair.

Everything about this picture is 'wrong' and every acceptable standard of behavior in that time and culture is broken by this woman.

What Simon failed to provide in terms of minimal hospitality, the woman provided in spades: She washes Jesus' feet with her tears, wipes them with her hair, anoints him with oil, and kisses his feet. She does what Simon failed to do, and in doing so, embarrasses him to boot!

As to this woman's backstory—Luke gives us little to go on. Is she a prostitute? Not necessarily. Abused, broken, more likely. The implication is that she and Jesus have crossed paths before this dinner party. She has come, prepared to express her devotion to Jesus as his disciple! But Simon labels her: Instead of a red "A" emblazoned on her dress, Simon would place an "S" for sinner. How dare she enter his home and act this way! Disgraceful! If Jesus is a prophet, he would know all about her!

Jesus does know. He knows what Simon is thinking, and Jesus calls him out in a very polite but public way by telling this brief parable (v.41-43). Two individuals are in debt to a creditor for different amounts; one for ten times the amount of the other. Neither can repay the lender, who extravagantly forgives both the debts!

Jesus asks Simon his first question:

Which of them will love him more? (v.42)

⁴³Simon replied, "I suppose the one who had the bigger debt forgiven."

"You have judged correctly," Jesus said.

THEN Jesus asks the second, harder question, and the literal turning point of the story; for Jesus speaks to Simon as he turns toward the woman.

"Do you see this woman?"

Simon has not taken his eyes off her since she entered the room.

What Simon sees is not a person, he sees an object, a label: "SINNER."

Labels dehumanize, categorize, create a false sense of superiority/inferiority. Simon sees someone who is "less than"; certainly inferior to himself. It's quite likely Simon knew this old Jewish prayer: "Thank God I am not a Gentile or a woman..."!

Simon's self-righteousness caused him to be blind to his own sinfulness as well as the common humanity in the room with him.

Simon does not see his own sin, or his need for forgiveness.

Simon does not see an individual made in the image of God.

Do you and I see this person, this individual?

More to the point: Who do you see when you look in the mirror?

We are frequently confronted with people who make us uncomfortable by their very presence. Honestly, we would prefer NOT to see them, so we do everything we can to avoid eye contact with them: The person standing by the freeway off-ramp or intersection with a hand-lettered cardboard sign. We don't want to make eye contact with the person in front of the grocery store collecting signatures on a petition. We divert our gaze from these and others because to really "see" them, would require something of us.

Years ago when Rob and I were preparing to move from graduate school to northern California, we began visiting grocery stores and strip malls, search of empty boxes. One day I parked and walked down a long, sloped driveway next to a grocery store loading dock where there were two huge dumpsters. They were so tall that even on tip toe, I could not see over the sides. As I neared the first one, I could hear movement coming from inside of it. Thinking it was likely a dog searching for scraps of food, I leapt up to take a look. What I saw stunned me: a short grey-haired woman, with her back to me was combing through the contents of the dumpster! She had not heard me approach. I feared that if I spoke, I would scare her, so what did I do? (I am not proud of this!) I turned around and went back to my car and drove away.

I wanted to **un-see** her! Because to **see** her would demand that I am vulnerable. To **see** her would cost me something: certainly my time, my energy, my money, my focus. To **see** her would require that I engage with her, one human being to another.

Immediately I was convicted, ashamed. I was barely a block away when I turned around and went back. It had been only a matter of minutes, but in that brief time she had left, moved on, disappeared. I then drove the streets in the immediate area—driving systematically, up one block and down the next—searching for her, to no avail.

It was an eye-opening experience for me! I vowed that I would not do that ever again. By God's grace, I want to "**see**" people as the unique individuals they are, each with their own story. In order to SEE others, I must first SEE and acknowledge my own prejudices, stereotypes, assumptions. I must confess these human judgements as sin, because they dehumanize the other person.

I must try –with the help of the God who shows no partiality—to allow others to tell me who they are:

To share their stories: their own pain and promise,
Gifts, and griefs, needs and desires, hopes and fears.
I need to avoid objectifying—labeling--categorizing others.

Friends, it pains me when leaders—those we would look to as role models—engage in name-calling that is racist—sexist—homophobic—and more. The now former president of Puerto Rico even denigrated and made fun of hurricane victims in his own country. Really? Last time I checked, Hurricanes show no partiality! We need leaders who can truly “SEE” themselves, and others! May God correct our vision so we can truly see with Jesus’ eyes.

I want to allow others to tell me who they are.
I will hope to call them by name, for this woman, as many in scriptures, remains nameless.

Through Jesus’ use of the parable about the debtors, he compares/contrasts Simon’s actions (or inactions) with those of the unnamed woman. Even Simon concludes that the person with the greater debt, has greater gratitude, than the one with the smaller debt. While both are forgiven, the one who is most extravagant is the creditor!

This nameless woman, has had her debts expunged, her slate wiped clean, forgiven by an extravagantly loving Lord! And her actions reflect the immensity of her gratitude. She offers her tears, the perfume, in worship.

Simon does not sense his indebtedness—his own need for forgiveness--and therefore feels little or no gratitude. These two individuals represent a study in contrast.

Suppose you have an “Antique Roadshow moment”—you purchase a painting at a garage sale, at a bargain basement price. It has some dirt or mud on it, but there’s something about it...! Then you discover it is a priceless Rembrandt! Do you focus on the mud or the masterpiece?

What Simon and what Jesus “see” when they look at this woman are two very different things: one sees the ‘mud’ and one sees the ‘masterpiece’.

It is a case of mistaken identity, because each one of them—both Simon and the woman—are children of God, made in God’s image. One has realized that reality and claimed it as her rightful identity. The other has not.

What about you? How do you see yourself?

Do you see yourself as one beloved by God, one of inestimable value and worth; one redeemable and forgiven?

How we see ourselves determines in part, how we see others.

May we see others as Jesus sees this woman...and not, as Simon did. His was a case of mistaken identity. She is—as each person is--a child of God!

Let us pray: Indeed, we sang and we pray that you oh God will indeed, open our eyes, correct our vision, so that we can see ourselves as you see us, and so that we can see others as You see them.

Thank you for claiming us as your children, forgiving and redeeming us.

May we then be agents of correcting mistaken identities...

Make us more like Jesus, in whose name we pray: Amen.