

March 1, 2020

*“Do You See This Woman?”*

John Wesley United Methodist Church

Luke 7:36-50

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How many of you saw that video clip or read in the news about the woman who reclined in her airline seat and caused an issue with the man seated behind her because it took away so much of his personal space and made him very uncomfortable in his seat? He then, reacted by punching the back of her seat repeatedly, making her very uncomfortable and very unhappy. It's obvious that both of them felt they were 'right' in the position they took, but it was equally obvious that both of them had no consideration for the other person. And isn't that the case so often in these times? So many of us have an “it's all about me” mentality. We don't take the time to understand or relate to one another, or to put ourselves in the other person's shoes. Instead, we label people or we look at them merely as objects that we have to put up with and deal with, rather than as children of God, human beings, with needs and desires just like our own.

That airplane episode reminded me of a great passage from a book entitled *God Is No Laughing Matter* by Julia Cameron. Here's what she wrote: “Last Sunday I let my two small dogs out at 7am and they started barking and making a ruckus. ‘Julia!’ I heard my neighbor's voice, ‘Some of us are trying to sleep in.’ Chastised, I called the dogs back inside and made a mental note to myself to apologize later. You see, apology – asking forgiveness – is a learned art, not only for me, but for most of us. A friend once asked me, ‘Which would you rather be? Right or reconciling? Being right can be lonely.’ My friend then advised me to stop being right and to start apologizing in order to mend relationships. I wanted to say, 'But, I am right. What about principles.’ Then I decided to experiment. ‘I'm sorry,’ I told the clerk whose arrogance triggered me to be short tempered. ‘I didn't mean to be so irritable.’ The clerk, to my astonishment, softened her haughty attitude. ‘I just broke up with my boyfriend,’ she confessed. ‘I'm sorry if I got impatient.’ Next I tried it out on the post office worker. ‘I'm sorry I was cross.’ ‘We are slow here,’ he laughed, ‘It's the land of mañana, you know?’ I tried it out next on my ex-husband. ‘I'm sorry. Sometimes it takes me a while to hear your point of view.’ ‘I know what you mean,’ he laughed, ‘I'm that way with you.’ Somehow, adversarial feelings seem to melt in the face of conciliatory softness. A mark is taken off when we apologize and ask forgiveness, and very often a second mark is taken off in return. ‘I'm sorry about my dogs’, I told my neighbor. ‘No, please forgive me’, she said. ‘I was so crabby.’ After that exchange, we both grinned ruefully. Without my apology, I would have never learned about a great new novel she recommended. I would not have learned that she

loves to grow flowers, just like I do. Worse, I would have missed a chance to forge a friendship. You see an apology doesn't mean you were awful, it just means you are human. And to my vast surprise, I find I rather like being human, even more than I like being right.” ‘I find I rather like being human, even more than I like being right.’

In today's Scripture lesson we see Ms. Cameron's story line played out in spades. Let me set the scene. In large Greco-Roman homes, like the home that the Pharisee Simon probably owned, the front room stood open to the street. A person passing by could look right into the house where a dinner party was in progress. The guests, who were all male, reclined on cushions around a low table. When they entered Simon's house, they would have removed their shoes and their feet would be washed by one of his servants. They would then be anointed with oil, and given a kiss of welcome by their host. When they sat down to eat, they sat in such a manner that their feet pointed away from the table and they would prop themselves up on their left elbow in order to eat with their right hand. Now for whatever reason, the Pharisee Simon had invited Jesus to this dinner party. And, as we learn from the Scripture, Jesus' feet were not washed nor was he greeted with a kiss. So why was he invited? I think Simon did it more out of curiosity, then real courtesy of Jesus. As a Pharisee, he probably wanted to learn more about Jesus in order to find out if there were any chinks in his armor, following that old adage about “keeping your friends close but your enemies closer.” But that's just my opinion.

So here they are having dinner when suddenly, in bursts this woman, probably a prostitute, carrying her alabaster jar of perfume. She rushes to get close to Jesus, kneeling at his feet, her tears running down her face onto his feet. Then in an act of profound humility, she lets down her hair, using it to dry them off, which, by the way, was scandalous for a woman to let her hair down. Then, as she leans down, she even goes so far as to repeatedly kiss Jesus' feet. Then she takes her alabaster jar, containing expensive perfume, probably the only thing of value she has, breaks the jar and pours out the perfume, anointing his feet. Perhaps she was saving that perfume, hoping that if and when the day ever came when some man might want to marry her, she would have it for her wedding. But desperate times call for desperate measures, and so she throws all of herself and all she has at the mercy of Jesus. Surely Jesus didn't need to be a prophet to know that this woman was a sinner who owed a great debt to God and society. But she was first and foremost a child of God, hurting and in need, coming before God, to apologize and repent. And so Jesus receives her loving attention and allows her to touch his body intimately in public even though that touch made him virtually unclean, because it was against the law for a woman and man

to touch, thereby making it, I guess, a sin. In the “honor and shame” culture of that time, Jesus' actions not only brought shame upon himself but they also shamed his host, Simon. So Simon protests! But instead of apologizing, Jesus defends the woman's behavior.<sup>1</sup> He emphasizes the beautiful thing the woman did for him. Washing his feet with her tears and then kissing them. And then he tells Simon a parable about a money lender and two debtors. One owes 500 pieces of silver, that would be the prostitute, and the other owes 50, that would be the Pharisee. Both could never repay their debts, and yet the money lender, that would be God, is prepared to cancel the debts of both of them. But in this case, only the prostitute apologizes and repents and then is forgiven of her sins by Jesus. Now Jesus has just reversed their roles. Now it is Simon who, because of his self-righteousness, is the sinner at the table for not forgiving and loving so little, while the woman who apologizes and repents and loves so much, goes forth debt free.<sup>2</sup>

But then Jesus asks Simon the question on which I believe this entire gospel story is centered. You see, this is not only a story about forgiveness, but also a story about vision, about eyesight. And it is as important today as it was two thousand years ago. It is about seeing the reality of the situations we are confronted with on a daily basis. “Simon,” Jesus asks, “Do you see this woman?” “Do you see this woman?” Because in truth, Simon didn’t see the woman. Not at all. What did Simon see? Through the filter of his doctrine, the strictness of his laws, and the limits imposed on the behavior of man and woman by his religion, Simon sees only a sinner. Only a sinner. He sees no child of God. And Jesus’ question is one we all need to ask ourselves, in all matters, and in all our daily actions and interactions. Do you see this woman? Do you see this man? Do you see their condition? Do you see their pain, their heartaches, their concerns? Can you see past their false bravado, their misplaced pride, their insecurities? Can you put yourself, even for a moment, in their shoes? Can you give them a hand, lend them an ear, accept them as the beloved child of God that they are? Then can you show them unconditional love, mercy and compassion that Jesus showed even a prostitute? Do you see how Jesus is telling us that we are all children of God , inextricably linked together by the same maker? Almighty God.

Yes, this is a story about our vision. It is said that we seldom see things the way they really are, rather we see things the way we really are. Let me repeat. We seldom see things the way they really are, rather we see things the way we really are. Today the United Methodist Church is facing a crisis.

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Do You See This Woman’ Sermon, Jeanne Choy Tate

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

However, today it's not a prostitute we are talking about, it's a homosexual we are talking about. That's why we need to tear away from our church imposed doctrines and blinders and see, really see, the text in front of us and the very real people that inhabit its stories, and our lives. What if we could see and act the way Jesus sees and acts? See the person, and not the label. See compassion and not judgment – that's God's role. See the beauty of a loving human touch and our very human emotions, rather than the inhibitions of social convention or the law?<sup>3</sup> It's something that we will have to think about and discuss in the next month or so. Some of us feel strongly that we are right if we are a church that is inclusive. Some of us feel strongly that we are right if we are a church that holds to its traditional values. And the truth is, we might never agree on all the issues. But as we go forward, I'm going to make the question we have to decide quite simple. And that is, whether we want to be right, or whether we want to be human. Do you want to be right, or do you want to be human? Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid