

Look Again
Sermon for June 12, 2016
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Each Friday night during the warm summer months, those who live in my neighborhood gather. We call these evening get-togethers porch parties. One person supplies the home, and everyone else brings a dish to share. I always look forward to this time with my neighbors.

This gathering is similar to the party the Pharisee is hosting in Luke. As we read today's Gospel text, we are immersed into a party. We can hear the loud sounds of stories being shared, we can smell the food cooking, and we can taste the wine the guests are sipping. Everyone is enjoying themselves, and we too enter into the enjoyment. However there is a slight interruption, an uninvited...unnamed woman enters the scene weeping.

Let's pause for a minute to set the stage, in order for us to understand the underlying meaning of this narrative. In ancient Israelite cultures, at a party the men would be lounging on pillows as they enjoy the company of one another. There would be guests explicitly invited to the party—such as Jesus. Other people would be gathered around the outside of the house in hopes to over hear the religious elite chatting—the woman. The host was responsible for the guests, and their comfort throughout the evening—Simon. Sounds quite similar to our modern day parties.

Why are parties so enjoyable for humankind? Why do I really enjoy Friday nights with my neighbors? What really happens at these parties in my neighborhood? Is it solely about the food or drinks? Is it about enjoying someone else's home? No, of course not. It is about fostering friendships. Gathering and sharing stories, jokes, and pieces about our lives with others. These times together foster friendships among neighbors. We get to really know one another, and this knowledge turns into genuine love and care. The dinner party the Pharisee Simon hosted was very similar—Simon and the other religious leaders wanted to get to know Jesus. And boy do they get to know him—and what a wake up call it is.

The party was off to a good start. Simon was pleased, Jesus was relaxed, and friendships are beginning to form. Until, the party is interrupted. A woman comes up behind Jesus weeping. As she cries her tears pool on the floor near where Jesus is lounging. Therefore, this unnamed...uninvited woman begins to wash Jesus' feet. Moreover, she lets down her hair to dry Jesus' feet.

It is said that the woman was a sinner—we do not know the root of her sin. Many scholars make assumptions, but she doesn't tell us. She could be a prostitute—which is the most common assumption. But let us look again at the text, which says, "She was known throughout the city for her sins, which were many." Perhaps she was known in the marketplace for stealing food, she could be a beggar, or she could be a person with an illness seen as unclean by the Jewish community. We do not know. The text is ambiguous, and draws us deeper into the story. However, most importantly this label adds a division between Simon and the woman—between those "invited," and those "unwelcomed"—between the religious, and the sinful.

However, we do know the woman was breaking down all social norms. We see her touching a man, kneeling down before him. She has letting down her hair in public. She crashed the party. These acts in themselves make her unclean; in turn, making Jesus unclean by touching him. A huge No No, according to the Pharisee hosting the party.

As the story continues, the Pharisee is appalled that Jesus would let such a disruption take place, even suggesting that Jesus is not who Jesus claims to be—a prophet. So Jesus' shares a parable with Simon about two debtors.

Once again let us pause to unpack the historical context. Parables, stories, and jokes where often shared by men at dinner parties. It was a form of entertainment for those gathered. To us, Jesus entering into this parable may seem rude at first, but in reality he is resorting back to the polite manners at the time—after he has allowed a rude disturbance.

This is true about our modern day parties as well—we too share stories in order to convey points to those around us. These stories point towards who we are—Jesus is doing the same thing. Jesus is telling Simon and the reader more about who he is.

The parable goes as follows:

A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he canceled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?"

Now Jesus places the ball is in Simon's court. Simon must insert himself into this awkward scenario. So Simon answers,

"I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt."

Jesus affirms his correct answer, and invites Simon to look again, and see the woman at his feet. Jesus poses this question to emphasize the point; he asks Simon, "Do you see this woman?"

Of course Simon sees the woman. How could he not? She has taken center stage at his party. But does he really see her? This is the question that Jesus is asking. Do you, Simon a devout religious man, really see this lowly woman who needs to know she is worthy?

Well, Simon certainly does now! Jesus is making it clear, that this woman is more hospitable than he. This woman knows who Jesus is, and she is overflowed with love out of gratitude towards him, and acts upon her hearts fulfillment.

After asking Simon to look again, Jesus invites us to look again at the situation at hand. Simon has not offered water for washing after Jesus' long day on the road, but the woman has offered her tears to cleanse Jesus' feet. Simon did not properly greet Jesus with a kiss, but the woman has un-relentlessly kissed Jesus' feet. Besides, the woman goes beyond hospitable customs, offering Jesus ointment for anointing.

These signs of hospitality are not a requirement for a host to provide to a guest in ancient Israel. Nonetheless, these acts of washing the feet, and greeting with a kiss emphasize an open welcome. They show that the host is glad to have the company of the guest. If we read the verses immediately preceding our Gospel lesson this morning, we see that the Pharisees do not welcome Jesus. In fact, he is outright rejected by this religious sect. Listen to this passage from Luke 7: 28-30,

I tell you, among those born of women no one is greater than John; yet the least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.” (And all the people who heard this, including the tax collectors, acknowledged the justice of God, because they had been baptized with John’s baptism. But by refusing to be baptized by him, the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected God’s purpose for themselves.)

Returning to the selected pericope this morning, Simon emphasizes these points. The religious elite are doing their duty by inviting Jesus to hang out with them, however they are not welcoming towards him.

Following this critique of Simon, Jesus says,

“ 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.”

This proving that Jesus is a prophet, contrary to Simon’s original false assumptions. Jesus knows Simon’s thoughts before he speaks. Jesus perceives the woman’s heart. Yet, he is more than a prophet for he forgives sins—some thing only God alone can do.

Now at the end of this selection of text, we are asked, as the crowd remarks, to reevaluate this parable, and our lives. The Crowd asks, “Who is this who even forgives sins?” Look again, this question asks of us.

This leads to three main questions for us to ponder this morning. Who is Jesus, what light does this text shed on his role in our lives today? What role do we play in this story— Simon, the woman, or the crowd? We want to know are the woman’s sins forgiven; therefore, she shows great love. Or does she show great love, and in turn her sins are forgiven?

These are the questions for us to reflect upon today. Let’s hold off for on answering the first question, who is this Jesus? And let us first look at the second one, what role do we play in this story?

I have to admit stories such as this one, scream caution to me as a churchgoer. As an individual, with a high level of theological education it makes me uncomfortable to hear Jesus’ critique of Simon. Nonetheless, if I am honest at times I am very much like Simon more than the woman. But, Simon is not only like myself; Simon resembles all of us. Simon reads scripture and studies it daily. Simon meditates and prays. Simon makes sure to tithe his income. If Simon were a member of Church of the Covenant, he would be a valuable contributor in a mission group.

When Jesus talks to Simon, he is talking to us church people, followers of the law. Jesus is telling us, that we need to SEE the “woman.” Who might resemble the “*sinful woman*” in our community today? Who among us do we consider an “unwelcomed” guest?

We may be quick to say no one, but is that the truth? I would venture to say that there are many within this very congregation that do not fully feel welcomed or a part of the church.

Maybe this person is a community member—not able to make the full covenant commitment for a number of outside reasons, but they wish they could.

Perhaps this individual is a person who struggles with mental illness, or a physical disability, and they look and act different from ourselves.

Or maybe this person is someone in your neighborhood that wishes a friend would invite them to church.

Yes, we notice them. We know they are here. But, we are hesitant to welcome them into our community fully, somewhat because we do not know how. Nonetheless, Jesus says, “Do you see?” Jesus asks us to look again!

More than simply seeing others, Jesus asks us here to see ourselves fully, including our shortcomings. Like the woman, in our story, we are called to recognize that we are a sinful people. However, like the Pharisee Simon, we often think we are special. We think we are special because we follow our covenant, because we welcome others into our midst—even if it is not with fully outstretched arms.

Jesus by saying, “Do you see this woman,” ask us to look deep inside ourselves to find *the sinful woman (or man)* that lives in each of us. Jesus’ wants us to be honest about our shortcomings.

Yes, we are special, and Jesus loves us individually along with as a whole community dearly. However, there are times when we do not follow God with our whole selves. We think our ways, are better than God’s ways.

Hence, we are ALL Simon, trying to be self-righteous followers of the law. All while, we are ALL the *sinful woman*, knowing that no matter how hard we try, we fail to live into God’s kingdom fully.

Yet, the important thing to notice about the woman is her sins do not fill her with guilt. She knows that Jesus welcomes her, and that her sins are forgiven even before she asks for forgiveness. Her sins are first forgiven, and therefore she acts out of great love. Which answers the third question, we are a forgiven people because Christ died on the cross for us; Christ rose conquering death for us; and we hold to the hope that Christ will come again.. Because of this great act of love—which was not on our own account—we reach out to others in great love.

God does not require us to do good works, or to follow the law before God forgives us. As our lectionary text from Galatians this week reminds us that we are justified, [made in line

with God] for our faith [belief and trust] in Jesus Christ alone. Paul writes in Galatians 2:16a,

yet we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ

This returns us back to our first question, who is Jesus Christ? What does Jesus ask of us in this passage? Well our scripture this morning tells us that Jesus sees. Jesus sees us fully. Jesus welcomes, he welcomes us all with open arms, despite our religious self-righteousness or our sinfulness.

In conclusion, we are all Simon and the woman. We are asked to see and invite those on the outskirts of society with open arms. Not simply providing for them, but making them a welcomed member of our community. Creating a space for them to be their true selves, and to find a place in which they can contribute.

God is asking you to look. What do you see? God is asking you to listen. What do you hear? God is asking you to help. God is also asking where might others help you? God is asking you to look again! How does this change your interactions?

Look again! Look again at your life, and look again at those around you! What do you see?

In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen