

Two images came to me as I read and reread the text from Luke for today. My first thought happened last Sunday. It was towards the end of our fellowship time and a man was standing in the hallway door wanting to talk with me. I was sure that he was seeking money or some type of help. I was not prepared for what he asked, "Can I lie down on the grass under that big tree for a few minutes?" After some conversation that was all he wanted, permission to lie down on the grass and cool off for a few minutes. I was impressed that he asked.

The second, was one of one of our pre-k young men. He always seemed surprised when he was caught doing something he wasn't supposed to be doing. Now, he was not doing anything really wrong, it was just not what he was supposed to be doing. He always thought no one could see what he was doing. No one can see me!

They were watching Jesus. Simon may have had motives beyond just inviting Jesus to come and be a dinner guest at his home. Here was a young rabbi, a prophet - let's see how he reacts when...

Jesus was invited to the home of Simon, a Pharisee, a keeper of the Law. This was a home where you would expect all the rituals and traditions to be observed. There would be people watching both Simon and Jesus. How will Jesus react? How will Simon react? If the traditions are not observed what will be the response of Jesus?

The setting would probably be an open courtyard. The guest should be welcomed, anointed with oil, their hands and feet washed and then they would take their places reclining around the table. However, Simon did not offer to Jesus any of the accepted and expected hospitality. There was no anointing of the head with oil or the washing of the hands and feet. Tradition stated that these had to be done before the guest could be seated and the grace offered for the meal. Is Simon testing Jesus? Did he also fail to show traditional hospitality to his other guests?

Jesus failed to take the bait. Instead he demonstrated what he had been teaching and preaching by accepting the actions of this questionable woman. Ken Bailey notes, "Clearly Jesus had been proclaiming his message that God loves sinners. The Pharisees did not agree, because in their view God cared for the righteous who kept the law. Jesus as a young rabbi was just getting started, and they could yet correct him and mold him, or so they apparently assumed." They taught that a sinner should confess their sins, make reparation for them and then follow the law. Jesus should have stopped the woman. He doesn't. He accepts her acts of love.

The episode demonstrates that both Simon and the woman stand as sinners in need of forgiveness and grace. One understands it, the other doesn't. One acknowledges her need with extravagant love and accepts the grace that Jesus offers. The other... Like most of the New Testament stories we are not told how it ends.

Jesus' question for Simon is, "Do you see this woman?" For me, this is the real question and crux of the story. Simon thinks he knows this woman, he knows her past and her present. He knows that anyone who would claim to be a prophet would know who she was and would not tolerate her presence or actions. He was not concerned with the conditions that may have led her to this place or ways of helping her get out of it. She was simply a sinner and one to be shunned and ignored. He could not see beyond who she was in his eyes. He could not forgive her nor her interactions with Jesus. She was a sinner and Jesus should have known better. Here was a man claiming to be a prophet and he knows how a prophet should act. He refused to see beyond what he wanted to see.

This same question is poised to us today, “Do you see this...?” Or, “What do you see?” Or, “Did you see?” “What do you see?”

A homeless person - a human being in need.

A person of questionable character, a sinner - or one who stands in need of grace.

A street woman or a mother, wife, daughter - a child of God.

A man living on the streets or a veteran traumatized by the war he fought in.

A man or a husband, a father, grandfather.

A sinner in need of judgment or one who stands in need of Christ’s love and grace.

A rich Pharisee patting himself on the back for how good he has been and how God has blessed him because he is rich or one who also stands in need of God’s redemptive grace.

One who embraces the bad theology that riches mean God’s blessing or one who needs to understand the true meaning of love and grace.

(Jesus rejects both premises that riches means God likes what you are doing and riches are an indication of God’s blessing. — Sermon for another day).

Both Simon and the woman stand in need of God’s grace. One who thinks he has already made it and the other who is locked in a system she can’t get out of. Simon was willing to judge the woman but not willing to look in the mirror and his own needs. Simon was willing to judge the woman and she was willing to show extravagant love for the grace she has accepted.

We need our eyes opened. Our first step must be in seeing as God’s sees. My mind went to an Interfaith coalition that I was a member of in Los Angeles. The key word there being Interfaith. It was an eye opening experience for me and one for which I am grateful. There Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Christians, etc. work together to build a better community: they run a housing project for those in need, a series of food banks and kitchens around the Korea Town section of LA and work on helping each to understand the other. We sought to learn from one another while working together in those areas we could agree on.

One of the events they sponsored was a trip to the Middle East. People could not image this group traveling together to this area of the world. A group of Muslims, Christians, and Jews traveling, visiting, laughing, playing and praying together. They wanted the world to see that it is possible to live together in harmony (I was sorry I could not go). Together they visited holy sites to all and to each religion. They visited synagogues, mosques and Christian churches together - not separating and going their separate ways. They told of one guide who would not believe they were together. Eyes were opened to new possibilities.

My work with this group changed how I saw others. Working with these men and women caused me to see not their faith banner but men and women who were now friends. We knew each others’ faith but we also were discovering who the person was and their love and concern for the world.

Jesus asked Simon, “Simon, do you see?” Jesus is asking us the same question today. “Did you see?” What do you see?

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NIV, New International Bible Society, Zondervan, 1973, 1978, 1985

NRSV, Division of Christian Education, NCC, 1988

Bailey, Kenneth, Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes, IVP Academic, Downer’s Grove, Ill