

"Do You See this Woman?"

"Shalom! Welcome! Peace be with you!" (Kiss sides of cheeks. Place oil on head.) "Here is water for your feet. And please, come and join us at the table."

In first century Near Eastern culture, this greeting was common for hosts. Hosts would greet their guests with a kiss, provide water for their feet, and place oil on their heads. It was important for hosts to fulfill their role as host and to honor their guests and prevent *any* of their guests from being dishonored.

Dinners, or banquets, were not simply excuses to get together with friends; they were *strategic* events. Dinners were opportunities to climb the social ladder. In order to climb the social ladder, hosts would invite guests who were at their social status or higher. Their guests would then be indebted to invite them to their dinner, and on it went. The closest comparison in our twenty-first century Western culture might be a political party, where each guest is invited strategically and has a particular social standing.

We find ourselves at the home of Simon the Pharisee. Jesus has been invited and so accepts the invitation and goes. But we don't see any of the usual gestures of hospitality. Verse 36 simply says that Jesus "went into the Pharisee's house and took his place at the table."

We go on to read in verses 37 and 38 that someone *else* plays the host's role. "A 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. As 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."

What is going on here?! A sinful woman of the town comes into Simon the Pharisee's house uninvited, and performs an embarrassing display in front of all of Simon's guests. How dare she? She truly is uncouth. And what's worse? Jesus doesn't do anything about it! He lets her carry on, letting her hair down in such an undignified manner. Jesus will bring shame on them all.

It's fascinating to see how *easy* it is to relate to Simon the Pharisee. We know the social norms, who is in and who is out. We don't like unexpected guests; it's difficult enough to accept "plus ones" at weddings!

When I was about 4 years old, I had a friend who wasn't quite potty-trained. My parents groaned when I told them that I wanted to invite her to my birthday party. They told me that they didn't want to have to wash all of the furniture after she left, and so they didn't let me invite her.

Somehow, she found out about my party. It may have even been through me – I likely told her that I *couldn't* invite her because she would pee on the furniture. So, as I sat with friends around me and opened presents, I saw my friend, nose against the glass door, watching.

Who's in and who's out, *that* is the question. For my party, the outsider was my friend who couldn't hold it. In our text, it is *absolutely* sinful women like this, who barge into people's homes and embarrass themselves. In our text, the outsider is also Jesus, who does not turn the sinful woman away, but *encourages* her by accepting her hospitality.

Simon doubts Jesus. *Jesus can't be a prophet! If he were, he would know this woman is a sinner, and would not allow her to do what she is doing.*

Jesus *knows* his thoughts and responds to Simon with a story. *Two men owed money to a moneylender, one 500 days' worth of income and the other 50. They could not repay him, so he forgave both debts. Which of them will love him more?* (Lk 7:41 – 42).

Simon answers with reservation, "I *suppose* the one who had the bigger debt forgiven" (Lk 7:43a).

Jesus ironically affirms him. "You have *judged* rightly," he says (Lk 7:43b). Jesus knows that from the *time* he has come in, Simon has been judging. He has not cared to treat his guests with honor or protect them from shame. He did not offer water for Jesus' feet, a kiss, or oil for his head. He has judged Jesus and determined that he is not a prophet. He has judged the woman, and determined that she is no one but a sinner, who *ought not* be at his dinner. And so he too judges the men in the story. *He* has been the judge.

Jesus turns to the woman and says 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. You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I arrived, has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet. Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven – as her great love has shown. But whoever has been forgiven little loves little" (Lk 7:44 – 47).

Though Simon has been judging in condemnation from the beginning, *Jesus* is in fact the judge. *Jesus* determines who is right before God, and not Simon. Jesus has forgiven the woman, and the woman has loved *greatly*. So that there is no mistake that she is forgiven, Jesus tells the woman in front of Simon and all his guests, "Your sins are forgiven" (Lk 7:48). Jesus welcomes her from the outside to the inside.

Like Simon, we *often* act as the judge too. We judge ourselves and so we judge others too. In our insecurity, we feel the need to push others down so that we appear taller.¹ Of course, we all know that making others shorter doesn't *make* us taller or better, but the illusion encourages us. When we are

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secure enough to honestly reflect, we can see that we are simultaneously saint and sinner², as much in need of God as the person next to you. Mother Teresa once said, “If you judge people, you have no time to love them.”³

“Do you see this woman?” Jesus asks. Simon has seen the woman, has judged her, and is angry. “But do you *see* this woman?” Jesus asks. “Do you see how she loves me?” “She loves me greatly because she knows she is forgiven.”

Who is this woman? Do you see her? Perhaps she has intruded into your life, uninvited, and embarrasses you publicly. Perhaps she’s in your family, at your workplace, in your neighborhood, or even at church. Every time you see her, she is an intrusion on your life, and you wish she wasn’t there. And she *desperately* needs to know that she is loved and forgiven. I pray that you would see her and have compassion toward her.

Years ago, in a small country church, a Presbyterian pastor was just beginning his ministry. “A young woman from the area arrived one day with her baby, hoping to present the child for baptism. Her little one had been born out of wedlock. It was the kind of sociological reality that could lead to shunning in a small town.

“On the day of the baptism, she stood by herself before the congregation, holding her baby. That’s when the inherent awkwardness of the situation fully dawned on the pastor. In many church traditions there’s an important moment that accompanies the baptism of a child. The pastor or priest asks: ‘Who stands with this child to help ensure that the commitments made this morning will be carried out? Who will be there for this child in times of need? Who will help ensure he or she is brought up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord?’

“The mother stood alone. There was no father. No grandparents. No godparents. No one to answer those questions.

“Then, without hesitation – as if the moment had been scripted in advance – the entire congregation stood. Every hand went up. Those present spoke as if with one voice: ‘We will!’”⁴

Do you see this woman?

“Do you see this woman?” Jesus asks. To see this woman requires vulnerability, because perhaps when we see this woman, she will see *us* and we will see *ourselves*. Vulnerable sinners, all in need of the love and forgiveness of Jesus.

And hear the good news! Jesus *saw* the woman and did not turn her away. Jesus did not care for his own status, but sought to lift up the one who had been rejected and scorned by society. Jesus saw

² *Simul Justus et Peccator*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theology_of_Martin_Luther

³ <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/2887-if-you-judge-people-you-have-no-time-to-love>

⁴ <https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0/#starred/15bc3c50eebe2e6b>

Simon too. He did not condemn him, but held up the mirror and invited Simon to see that he was not better and the woman was not worse; they were *both* sinners in need of forgiveness.

Jesus sees you too. He sees you and forgives you. "I see you. You are forgiven. Go in peace to see and love your neighbor" Amen.