

To See or Not to See

Passage: Luke 7:36-50 | From the series: Luke

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Let's say you see a man wearing a MAGA hat. What are you seeing? Or let's say you see a woman carrying a sign that reads "My body, my choice." What are you seeing?

If I'm looking at the words, some questions come to mind. I wonder: If someone wearing the hat believes the words, when does he (or she) think America was great, and who does he (or she) think it was great for at that time? I wonder: If there's a body growing inside a body, what about the body inside the body? But what if I'm looking at the people?

Jesus has something to say to us about the way we see people. To see or not to see: That is the question.

When I began studying Luke 7:36-50 a few weeks ago, I was captivated by it. Moreover, as I started writing this commentary based on the narrative, I could hardly stop thinking about it. The more I spent time with it, the more I realized that there was much more to see in it than I was seeing.

Luke is the only gospel writer who features this narrative. We can be thankful he includes it, because it's a gem.

Jesus has been accused of being "a friend of tax collectors and sinners" (Luke 7:34). Now we meet a "sinner."

Quite a scene

Luke 7:36-38:

One of the Pharisees asked him to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and reclined at table. And behold, a woman of the city, who was a sinner, when she learned that he was reclining at table in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster flask of ointment, and standing behind him at his feet, weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears and wiped them with the hair of her head and kissed his feet and anointed them with the ointment.

The Pharisees were influential leaders who interpreted the Mosaic Law, which God gave to Israel, in a rigorous way. They sought to purify Israel. Up to this point in the gospel of Luke, Pharisees have both questioned Jesus and opposed him. One of them now invites him to dinner. Why? Luke doesn't say.

Jesus accepts the invitation. He is not only a friend of tax collectors and sinners, he's also a friend of Pharisees.

It was common at mealtime to leave doors open for uninvited guests so that they could sit by walls and eat leftovers. Luke describes the woman as a “sinner,” a non-observant Jew: the kind of person who, from the perspective of the Pharisees, needs to start obeying the law the way they do to be part of the people of God.

Evidently, the woman not only knows of Jesus, she also knows that he is a friend of “sinners” such as her.

When reclining at table, diners would lean on their sides with their feet exposed. An alabaster flask, normally used for precious substances, had a long neck that was sealed and had to be broken so that its contents could be used (Genesis Matthew 26:7, Mark 14:3).

The woman, deeply moved by the presence of Jesus, weeps. Then she does what a slave would do, washing the feet of a guest—but in a most unusual way: She uses her tears for water and her hair for a towel (1 Samuel 25:41, John 13:1-17). In fact, she goes beyond washing his feet: She kisses his feet, mixing the ointment with her tears.

Anointing with oil on the head amounted to a special kind of greeting, allowing a guest to clean his face—but not anointing the feet, and certainly not anointing the feet with expensive ointment (Psalm 23:5, 141:5, Amos 6:6). A kiss of greeting was common—but not kisses on the feet! (2 Samuel 20:9, Luke 22:47-48)

Listen to the prophet Isaiah:

*How beautiful upon the mountains
are the feet of him who brings good news,
who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness,
who publishes salvation,
who says to Zion, “Your God reigns.” (Isaiah 52:7)*

Feet were considered the lowliest part of the body. However, so great is the news concerning the reign of God that even the feet of the one who brings it are considered “beautiful.”

Luke has already informed us that the coming of Christ is “good news of great joy that will be for all the people” (Luke 2:10). Jesus said the Spirit has anointed him to “proclaim good news to the poor” (Luke 4:18).

Consider the feet of Jesus, an itinerant preacher in Israel in the first century. At best, he would have worn sandals. He wouldn’t have had socks. He would have walked on dirt and rocks, not paved sidewalks, and his feet would have collected dirt and callouses. Later in the narrative, we learn that his feet were unwashed.

What does the woman do? So great is the good news, and so great is the one who brings it, that she kisses his feet!

She makes quite a scene. What does the Pharisee think?

Something to say

Luke 7:39-40:

Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner." And Jesus answering said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." And he answered, "Say it, Teacher."

When Jesus raised a widow's son from the dead, people proclaimed, "A great prophet has risen among us!" (Luke 7:16). The Pharisee at this point would take issue with that assessment.

In his view, a prophet would be able to know something and thereby do something. First, he would know what the Pharisee knows: that the woman is a sinner. And second, he would not accept the woman's gestures.

Jesus, however, is a great prophet: Even though the Pharisee keeps his thoughts to himself, Jesus knows what he is thinking.

Now, in reporting Jesus' speech, Luke lets us know the Pharisee's name. Addressing the Pharisee by name, Jesus doesn't say what he wants to say. Instead, he asks permission to speak, granting Simon the courtesy while at the same time probing his desire to hear what he has to say to him.

Simon calls Jesus "Teacher," a title of respect (Luke 2:46, 3:12). However, Simon has already said to himself that Jesus is not a prophet; so his address rings hollow. You can learn from a teacher. Indeed, a teacher has information to convey. So how does Simon answer? "Say it, Teacher."

Nevertheless, Luke makes us wonder if Simon really wants to hear what Jesus has to say to him.

What does Jesus have to say to us?

A story and a question

Luke 7:41-42:

"A certain moneylender had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he cancelled the debt of both. Now which of them will love him more?"

Turns out Jesus has a short, simple story to tell Simon.

One denarius was a day's wage for a middle class worker (Matthew 20:2). One debtor owed the equivalent of one and three-quarters years' wages, while the other debtor owed the equivalent of two months' wages. Nevertheless, both lacked the ability to repay the debt.

Shockingly, the moneylender cancels their debts. Also shockingly, the moneylender treats both debtors equally, canceling the greater debt in addition to the lesser debt.

After telling his story, Jesus asks Simon a question. Do people whose debt is cancelled respond in love for their lenders? Some might feel that they had been gouged or deceived by lenders and that canceling the debt is the least they could do. Perhaps many would be thankful. But love? Who loves a moneylender, even one who cancels his debt?

Nevertheless, in telling the story, Jesus assumes that both debtors will respond in love. We get the sense that there's more going on in the story than meets the eye.

Jesus had something to say to Simon. Simon said he wanted to hear it. Now, after hearing the story and the question, does Simon have something to say to Jesus?

The answer

Luke 7:43:

Simon answered, "The one, I suppose, for whom he cancelled the larger debt." And he said to him, "You have judged rightly."

Which debtor will love the moneylender more? Simon could have answered with another question, such as, "What makes you think either of them will love the moneylender?" Instead, to his credit, he takes the question at face value and gives the obvious answer.

However, what are we to make of the word "suppose"? Is Simon hedging? Is he leaving himself some wiggle room in case he's answered wrongly? Does he suspect that there are more details to the story than Jesus hasn't divulged? Is he putting his guard up? Does he suspect a trap?

In any event, regardless of the word "suppose," Jesus praises the one who called him "Teacher" for his correct answer.

Jesus had something to say to Simon: a story and a question. Simon answered the question. Jesus has something more to say to him.

Another question

Luke 7:44a:

Then turning toward the woman he said to Simon, "Do you see this woman?"

Jesus asks Simon another question. However, he's not looking at Simon as he does so; no, he turns toward the woman. His posture invites Simon to also turn toward the woman.

The question? "Do you see this woman?" Based on what we have read so far, maybe we can answer the question for Simon: "Of course I see this woman. I see that she is a sinner." Moreover, Luke has told us that Simon "saw" what the woman did to Jesus and took offense.

This time, instead of waiting for Simon's answer, Jesus continues talking. Turns out there's a lot to see.

Does Simon see this woman? Does he see himself? Can he see Jesus? Can he judge rightly, as he judged rightly in response to Jesus' story?

Some observations

Luke 7:44b-46:

“I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment.”

Jesus recounts for Simon what they both have seen the woman do. But he also recounts for Simon what he has seen Simon do—or, in this case, not do.

The woman, though she was not the host, extended hospitality—and did so to the extreme. Simon, though he was the host, neglected to extend even customary gestures of hospitality. The woman treated Jesus like an honored guest. Simon did not treat him like a guest at all.

Why did Simon invite Jesus to a meal? Still, Luke doesn't say. But based on Jesus' words, Luke leads us to conclude that whatever Simon was serving, hospitality was not on the menu.

And?

A big “therefore”

Luke 8:47:

“Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven—for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little.”

The verb translated “tell” would be literally translated “say.” Earlier, Jesus said, “Simon, I have something to say to you.” Simon answered, “Say it, Teacher.” Now Jesus literally says, “Therefore I say to you . . .” That's a big “therefore.” Jesus told the story and shared his observations for the sake of saying these two sentences to Simon.

The woman is a “sinner”—or at least she was a “sinner,” a non-observant Jew. Whatever her sins, and Jesus acknowledges that they are “many,” have been forgiven. Jesus does not say that reason she has been forgiven is her love. No, the evidence that she's been forgiven is her love.

Oh, which of the debtors will “love” the moneylender more? Simon judged rightly: the one who had the larger debt. The woman loved much—loved Jesus much. Now we know why the debtor who was forgiven much responded not simply in gratitude but in love: because the woman responded to Jesus in love.

But what of the one who is forgiven little? He loves little. Is “he” Simon? No and yes.

Are Simon's sins “little”? No, they are many, just like the “sinner.” Indeed, Simon's posture toward the woman indicates that his sins are many. However, in contrast to the woman, Jesus discerns that Simon believes that he only needs to be forgiven for “little.” Does Simon therefore love little? Whether or not he loves God little, it doesn't look as if he loves Jesus at all—and that he needs to recognize at the very least that Jesus speaks for God.

Jesus not only has something to say to Simon, he also has something to say to the woman. Finally, he says it. Again, what does Jesus have to say to us?

Words for the woman

Luke 7:48-50:

And he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." Then those who were at table with him began to say among themselves, "Who is this, who even forgives sins?" And he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

God had always forgiven sins in Israel for those who recognized their need. The place to go for forgiveness of sins was the temple, where animals were sacrificed. But John the Baptist began a counter-temple movement, which will culminate in the once-and-for-all sacrifice of the one who is assuring the woman that her sins have been forgiven.

For the first time in the narrative, we learn of others who were present at the meal. Literally, when Simon was evaluating Jesus, he "said in himself." Now those at table literally "say in themselves." Just as Simon kept his thoughts to himself, those at table keep their thoughts to themselves. However, whereas Simon drew a conclusion from his observations, those at table ask themselves a question: "Who is this, who even forgives sins?" Good question. Indeed, who is this?

Not only does Jesus assure the woman that her sins have been forgiven, he also assures her that her "faith" has "saved" her. The woman's faith is in response to the grace she has been shown. The apostle Paul will later explain: "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9).

The common valediction, "go in peace," takes on added significance in this case. She has peace with God. Paul again: "Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ (Romans 5:1-).

A bag of cookies

What are you seeing when you see a man wearing a MAGA hat? What are you seeing when you see a woman carrying the sign that reads "My body, my choice."

Whatever you're seeing, you're not seeing all there is to see. You don't know the story behind the hat or the story behind the sign. Moreover, you can't see into the heart of the one who's wearing the hat or the one who's carrying the sign.

I heard a man named Sam Ericsson tell the following story years ago, and I've never forgotten it.

A well-dressed businessman was waiting for his flight at Chicago O'Hare International Airport. Before he sat down in the terminal, he purchased a bag of cookies. A not-so-well-dressed, much younger man sat next to him. The businessman began to eat the cookies. To his shock, the unkempt younger man helped himself to the cookies. Finally, as both men worked through the bag of cookies, there was one cookie left.

The younger man took it, broke it in half, smiled at the businessman, gave him one half, and walked off with the other half. The businessman fumed. Finally, as he was leaving his seat to board the

plane, the businessman picked up his coat, which he had placed next to him. Underneath the coat he discovered a bag of cookies—his bag of cookies.

Turns out each man had bought a bag of cookies. It also turns out that the businessman unknowingly was eating the cookies that the young man had purchased. Needless to say, when the businessman saw the young man, he wasn't seeing all there was to see.

What does Jesus have to say to us?

Through Simon

Jesus speaks to us through his words to Simon.

Perhaps there are some people in our world or in our lives who we consider beyond the pale, perhaps borderline irredeemable.

Jesus' story presses upon us: Are your sins few or many? Even if we think our sins are few, a little sin will kill us just as much as a lot of sin. If you think that you owe God only a little because you think your sins are few, you still have no ability to repay him for your sins against him. Apart from the once-and-for-all sacrifice of Christ, we're destined for hell in any case.

Jesus wants us to recognize that our sins are many. Indeed, our sins are many, and they emerge from a heart that is turned against God and turned toward ourselves.

Ghastly in appearance

In his memoir *A Severe Mercy*, Sheldon Vanauken describes the conversion of both his wife, Davy, and him. It began with Davy. Sheldon writes:

One evening, I had gone to a lecture and left her, curled up with a book, peaceful and happy. When I returned a couple of hours later, I found her in a state of such grief and despair as I had never seen. I was terrified. It was then that she told me that, as she sat there in the quiet, her sins—not just the things she had done but the things she was—had come out and paraded before her, ghastly in appearance and mocking in demeanor. She had seen herself, she said, as she really was, and she was horrified.

I couldn't understand it. To me, she was the loveliest creature I had ever known, and quite incapable, I should have said, of any very dark sins. I tried to comfort her, telling her she was being far too hard on herself, but she only shook her head in a sort of agony.

To me, her sins—the things she had done—seemed not very great. But she was seeing not only what she had done but what she *was*—the self-centeredness of the self. And she was seeing it in the light of the holiness of God. [**Sheldon Vanauken, *A Severe Mercy* (San Francisco: HarperOne).**]

Indeed, our sins are many, even if we appear well-put-together.

Awareness of our sins improves our vision

If we recognize that our sins are many, and that Christ died for those sins, then we are better able to see others, especially those whom we consider beyond the pale, the way Jesus sees them: with compassion. We are better able to “judge rightly.” Awareness of our sins improves our vision.

If you think someone is beyond the pale, borderline irredeemable, and you know that your sins are many and that Jesus died for them all, then listen to his question again: “Do you see this woman?” “Do you see this man?” Now, what do you see?

About thirty years ago, I heard Judy Herminghaus, who went on to become our pastor to women, teach on this narrative. When she emphasized Jesus’ question, “Do you see this woman?” I immediately thought of someone, and I thought to myself, “No, I am not seeing this person.” At that point, I began to see that person with compassion. Because of my encounter with this narrative all those years ago, this is one of the narratives in our series that I wanted to preach.

What does Jesus have to say to us?

Through the woman

If you know that your sins are many, what should you do? The “sinner,” the lawbreaker—not the law keeper—shows us the way. Fall at the feet of Jesus.

Listen to Paul: “And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross” (Colossians 2:14).

Now Jesus speaks to you through his words to the woman. What does he say?

“Your sins are forgiven. Your faith has saved you; go in peace.”

Give thanks for God’s forgiveness of you. Revel in his salvation of you. Enjoy the peace you have with him.

Judge rightly

And what of Simon? Jesus told him a story, asked him a question, and shared his observations. Does Simon now see the woman differently? Does he see himself differently? Does he see Jesus differently? We don’t know, do we?

Now that you’ve absorbed the narrative, how do you see people? How do you see yourself? How do you see Jesus?

Can you judge rightly?