

MEALS WITH JESUS: Hospitality

Luke 7:36-50

September 24, 2023

Rev. Melissa Hatfield, First Baptist Church, Jefferson City, MO

WATCH/LISTEN: www.fbcjc.org/sermon/hospitality/

It is estimated that about 3.7% or 12 million Americans are colorblind.ⁱ Color blindness or color vision deficiency affects approximately 1 in 12 men and 1 in 200 women. So, if this gathering today represented the national average, about 9 of you are colorblind, and most, if not all of those 9, would be males. Those who are color blind see colors differently than most people. Color vision deficiency makes it hard to tell the difference between certain colors. Like in this photo of colored pencils. Those with no color vision deficiency see the full spectrum of the top row. For those with color blindness, they may see it more like the photo on the bottom, where certain colors, like reds and greens most commonly, look the same. Another type makes blue and yellow look the same. In rare cases, people have complete color vision deficiency, which means they don't see color at all.ⁱⁱ While there is no cure, special glasses or contact lenses can help some see differences between colors. And the giving of these glasses and the reaction of the recipients are some of my favorite videos. Family and friends, like in this photo, surprise someone in their life with special glasses and record the moment when they first see the full spectrum of the colors of this world. And in every single video, the individual immediately begins to weep upon seeing the vibrant beauty of the world they've been missing, and I imagine, they also weep because of the kindness of those who helped them see what was there all along.

In today's story from the Gospel of Luke, there is blindness, weeping, and kindness that seeks to help others see.

In our story today from the seventh chapter of Luke, Jesus is invited to the home of Simon, a Pharisee, to share a meal. It was the custom of Jesus' day that guests reclined on low couches during meals, with their legs stretched out behind them, often propped up on one elbow. If you're old like me, you look at this and have maybe one of three thoughts: heartburn, low back pain, and worries about how you'll get back up.

In today's meal with Jesus, there are three main characters along with other guests, servants, and watchful eyes from the community.

First, there's Simon the Pharisee. He would be a respected leader in the community. There's something we need to get clear about the Pharisees. Their goal was not to be self-righteous jerks, although they often are portrayed in this way. They cared very deeply about the safety and future of their country. They believed that the reason the Roman Empire was occupying their land and oppressing their people was because the people had fallen away from obeying God's Law given to Moses. So, they were on a campaign to clean up the country in order to open up a pathway for God's blessing to return to the nation. Part of that clean up process was

expressed in table fellowship. It mattered who you dined with, who you invited, and who invited you. The wrong guest or the wrong food, and the meal and participants would be unclean, impacting God's blessing on the individuals and the nations.

The Pharisees had heard claims that Jesus might be the long awaited Messiah, and some had witnessed his teachings and healings. Maybe some had been among those in last week's story that questioned why Jesus would share a meal with tax collectors and sinners. We don't know why Simon invited Jesus to his home for a meal, but Jesus accepts the invitation.

Which makes Jesus the second main character at this meal. He's been wandering around the countryside, performing miracles and proclaiming a radical new teaching about God's Kingdom. As we learned last week, Jesus loved meals. He ate with tax collectors. Why not the Pharisees? As they share a meal, the third main character enters the scene, interrupting the party.

We don't know much about her, except that she is known as a "sinner" or "a woman in the city." Many have assumed her sin is sexual, but as I've mentioned before about other women in scripture, the Bible does not say what her sin is. It simply states she is a sinner and her presence made those at the dinner look at her in disgust, and her actions at the meal with Jesus bring more disgrace.

As Jesus reclines at the table, his feet extended behind him as was the custom, the woman enters as an uninvited and unwelcomed guest. Then she proceeds to break all the rules about male and female contact. She uncovers and lets down her hair, which was only permitted by law in the privacy of a bedroom. She touches Jesus' feet. She washes his feet with her tears and anoints them with an expensive oil.

This is nothing less than scandalous and a complete disgrace, to her, Jesus, and the evening's host, Simon. Simon, shocked Jesus would allow this to happen, realizes there is no way Jesus is a prophet from God if he allows this kind of behavior. In verse 39, it reads, "Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, 'If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him, that she is a sinner.'" Simon writes off Jesus as a prophet because Jesus has allowed a sinner to touch him, to shame him, to make him unclean. If he were a prophet, Jesus would know the woman's heart. Simon soon learns not only does Jesus know her heart, he knows Simon's heart, too.

Notice the verse says Simon thought to himself. Yet, Jesus heard what he did not say out loud, and replied to Simon's disapproval with a story about a moneylender with two people who owed him money – one a small amount, one an amount ten times greater. Imagine one owing \$50 and one owing \$500. When neither could pay, the moneylender graciously forgave both debts. Jesus asks Simon, which of them will love the moneylender more – the one whose debt was large or the one whose debt was small?

Simon answered, "I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt." And Jesus agrees.

I love Simon's answer, "I suppose .." That is how you frame an answer when you know there is only one correct answer, but you don't want to admit it. In answering, Simon utters a judgement on himself.

The depth of gratitude is proportional to one's recognized need for forgiveness. At the meal, it is the woman whose gratitude is great, because she recognizes her great need for forgiveness. But Simon has yet to recognize his need for forgiveness.

After this, Jesus asks Simon a question, and I think this question is at the heart of the story. V. 44 says, "Then turning toward the woman, he said to Simon, 'Do you see this woman?'" I want you to picture this moment. Jesus has turned to look at the woman. He is not looking at Simon when he says to him, "Do you see this woman?" It is as if Jesus is forcing Simon to look at the woman with him, to see her through the eyes of Jesus.

I was in line with my niece at a store the other day, and she was talking about a display, and I had no idea what she was talking about. I couldn't see what she was seeing because of where I was standing. When she realized that my vision was blocked, she pulled me to lean to where she was looking, and there it was. I could see what she was seeing when I stood where she stood.

Jesus is pulling Simon to see this woman in a new way.

At the beginning of Luke's Gospel, during Jesus' first sermon, quoting the book of Isaiah, Jesus says this: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." Throughout Luke, Jesus has a ministry to the blind, helping them to see. This happens literally, but it happens even more figuratively.

This is the case with Simon. Jesus asks him, "Do you see this woman?" Whether Simon is aware of it or not, the answer is no. He does not. Both eyes work as God designed them to work, yet he is still blind. All Simon could see was her sin, her uncleanness, her unworthiness. He judged Jesus to not be who he said he was, because he thought Jesus couldn't see what kind of woman she was. But Jesus wants Simon to see that it is Simon that is blind because he does not see the woman as Jesus sees her. From the moment the woman walked into the meal, Simon saw only her sin and shame and wanted nothing to do with her. He was unable to see the extravagant love and gratitude she was displaying for Jesus.

Simon may be hosting the meal, but it is the woman who gives Jesus the customary hospitality Simon failed to give. "I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment." (vv. 44-46) The woman, whom Simon judged so unworthy,

has offered the gifts of hospitality that Simon as host should have provided his honored guest. The woman, with deep humility and gratitude, expressed true hospitality.

We don't know if Simon's sight is ever restored. The text doesn't tell us. But maybe like a good story we don't know the ending so we might be the ones to finish the story for ourselves. Was Simon the Blind Pharisee ever able to see others the way Jesus saw them? Are we able to see others the way Jesus sees them?

Do you see the woman in this story? Really see her?

This is a question theologian Barbara Reid wants us to ask. Do we see her the way Jesus does or are we blind like Simon?

I wonder if we do. Nearly every Bible translation of this passage from Luke titles the section, "A Sinful Woman Forgiven," or "The Pardon of a Sinful Woman" or "The Woman Who Was a Sinner." Reid points out that in almost all biblical titles for this section, the sinfulness of the woman is the focus. Why do none of our Bibles title this story as Jesus might title it, "A Woman Who Shows Great Love?" Or why is it not titled "The Sin of the Blind Pharisee" to focus on his sin, not hers?

The word sin, not only describes someone who was morally faulty but a sinner was actually "anyone who was outside of the law." And outside of law meant those who were considered "unclean" and couldn't participate in the temple rituals. Which included the disabled, slaves, those in debt, even those who just gave birth. According to Leviticus 12, after giving birth to a son you were unclean for 33 days, for a daughter 2 weeks, and then you would bring a lamb or a dove for purification. Then you're clean. Then you are reinstated back into the temple life (which was basically all of life, it's where the farmer's market happened, where the festivals were, where you paid taxes—everything). There were many rules that would consider one a "sinner" which would thereby cut you off from the community. For the Jews, any Gentile was pretty much a sinner.ⁱⁱⁱ It was just their way of categorizing someone who is unworthy of a flourishing life. Unworthy of being touched. Unworthy of entering the temple. Unworthy of power.

We've assumed for hundreds of years that her sin is sexual as if there could be no other sin committed by women in those days, or maybe even these days. Perhaps we are more like Simon the blind Pharisee than we realize. And Jesus is asking us today, "Do you see her?"

Of the three main characters at this meal, the woman is the only one who never talks, yet she speaks profoundly through her actions and her weeping. Will we listen to her?

Tim Costello tells how he was looking at this story, with the traditional belief that the woman was a prostitute, with a group of drug addicts and prostitutes in Melbourne, Australia. One of the prostitutes said, "Jesus must've been a really great bloke." She could imagine what it was like for this woman. She thought of the formal evenings at the big houses in the posh suburbs of

Melbourne. She thought about party-crashing one of those parties, of how she would be treated. She could understand what it cost this woman to anoint the feet of Jesus. She could imagine the repulsion directed toward her by other guests. She could hear the mutterings and see the glares. She could feel the threat of violence. She could understand how much this woman must have loved Jesus.^{iv}

Imagine the courage and the bravery of this woman to walk into that meal, knowing how the people at the table felt about her, how they saw her. Yet, she came in faith, trusting from what she has seen and heard about Jesus, that he will see her differently. Hoping this to be true, yet not knowing with certainty, but so overwhelmed with gratitude that she chooses to love extravagantly at the risk of being shunned once again. Tax collectors, sinners, woman in the city ... They were all drawn to Jesus, to the power of his love and acceptance. And **in response to that love**, they were overwhelmed by gratitude and freedom from their sins.

Simon didn't really see Jesus, and he didn't see the woman. Jesus longed for him to really see her – not as a category or sinner, but simply as a person who, above all, needs to be loved and forgiven, just like Simon. Their different responses to Jesus at the meal reveal their hearts and their understanding of grace. Simon shows little hospitality, little gratitude. The woman shows generous hospitality, generous gratitude. The debt forgiven her was great, and thus, her love was too. The more we understand what Christ has done for us, the greater our love will be for Christ and the greater our grace will be towards others.

As humans, we sometimes have a vision deficiency when it comes to seeing the world. Jesus, looking at the world, says to us, “Do you see her? Do you see him? Do you see them?” Jesus wishes to give us a set of lenses, Jesus lenses, so that when we look at our others, we might see the full array of hope, beauty, and goodness that God dreams for all of creation. Church, are we seeing those who the world or the church has deemed unworthy of a flourishing life with the world's lenses, devoid of the image of God? Or will we put on the lenses of Jesus, so we might see them as Jesus sees them.

Where are you in this story of a meal shared with Jesus? Luke invites us to lounge at the table, to find ourselves at Simon's meal with Jesus. Will we host Jesus, acknowledge only a small debt, and sit as judge over others or will we fall down at Jesus's feet, in tears, expressing our deep gratitude for the love and forgiveness Christ has freely given to us? Do we see her? Do we see him? Do we see them? May Jesus bring sight to us, so we might proclaim like woman who showed great love, “I once was blind, but now I see.”

Melissa Hatfield © 2023

All scripture quoted is from the NRSVUE unless otherwise noted.

ⁱ <https://www.colourblindawareness.org/colour-blindness/>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.nei.nih.gov/learn-about-eye-health/eye-conditions-and-diseases/color-blindness>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.reservoirchurch.org/sermon/love-of-a-sinful-woman-money-sex-and-power/>

^{iv} Chester, T. “A Meal with Jesus: Discovering Grace, Community, & Mission around the Table.” 2011, p.41