



Sunday, Feb. 21, 2021
Sermon Series: Love Without Limits

Making Room When We've Messed Up
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Luke 7:36-50 NRSV

³⁶One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and took his place at the table. ³⁷And a woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. ³⁸She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment. ³⁹Now 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." ⁴⁰Jesus spoke up and said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." "Teacher," he replied, "speak." ⁴¹A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. ⁴²When they could not pay, he canceled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?" ⁴³Simon answered, "I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt." And Jesus said to him, "You have judged rightly." ⁴⁴Then turning toward the woman, he said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? 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. ⁴⁵You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. ⁴⁶You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. ⁴⁷Therefore, 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." ⁴⁸Then he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." ⁴⁹But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?" ⁵⁰And he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

In a former time in my life-during my three years of seminary-I taught kindergarten at an afterschool program for kids who needed some extra support and resources. The center was right in the middle of a public housing development, so my small classroom of kiddos lived within a few blocks of the center. For about 3.5 hours afterschool we would further their learning through reading enrichment, creative activities, social and emotional support work, and a lot of playful learning.

Truth be told, I sometimes say I learned more from journeying with these kids than I did in the seminary classroom. Many afternoons (often even in the gloomy and rainy New Jersey weather we would take walks around the neighborhood. The closest playground was about 6 blocks away, so we walked a lot. On our walk we would often play "I Spy"...you know the game, right?

"I spy with my little eyes....something green"...and then everyone guesses...grass? The tree? The shamrock in the window? The Pinata? Yes! I would say the Pinata in the restaurant window. And then we would play again...

It's interesting what we choose to see, and not, right? Who we see and not?

There were many afternoons we would walk around a neighborhood very different than the one I grew up in and kids would see things I never could. I spy something fluffy they would say-my eyes would dart in every direction-I saw yards needing a bit of TLC or I would see police cars over patrolling the streets or young moms carrying their babies ...and of course they saw a teddy bear in the stroller of their neighbor who cares for them on the weekends when their parents work the night shift. As I got to know the community my eyes and sight changed too...I saw former kiddos from my class reading on their front stoops and their parents now sort of friends of mine who would greet with a big hug or I saw the flowers we planted in front of the center to celebrate spring.

It's interesting what we choose to see, and not, right? What we can see and not?

Today's text is not unique to Luke...this particular story shows up in some form in every gospel...this moment where a woman (from the margins of faith and society) lavishly anoints Jesus with her touch and tears and such expensive perfume it would have cost a years' worth of salary.

And in each accounting (though all four slightly different) those in the room with the most religious authority and prestige-the supposed insiders-miss the whole point of the encounter. There are not that many stories that show up in every gospel-the feeding of the 5K, the crucifixion and resurrection-some biblical scholars only say only about 10-12 events show up in all four gospels- and this is one of them.

It's interesting what we choose to see, and not, right? What we include in the story and not?

So, this morning I invite us to play a little game of I Spy with this text...put yourself in the dining room that day. Go ahead and imagine sitting in the corner and watching the events -play by play. Can you smell the intensity of the perfume yet? Can you hear the weeping of the woman? Can you feel the tension between the guests in the room?

So let's begin...

I spy ...a man. A Pharisee. An expert in the religious laws. An insider. A man who threw a dinner party to talk theology and check up perhaps on this man claiming to be a prophet of God. I spy a man who Luke portrays as arrogant and self-righteous. A man who was educated and who loved God with his full devotion -he knew how to love God by following the rules and staying within the lane of right and out of the lane of wrong. Faith was to be lived in a black and white-right and wrong manner-and I spy this man who knew that and was on a mission to make sure others did too. I spy a man who was called out by Jesus himself-he was asked...do you even see this woman? I see a man who knew all the right church answers.

Do you see him? Can you image the rage he felt when his dinner party was disrupted so provocatively? How raged he was at the embarrassment of having such a woman in his house? How blasphemous it was to his God to have a man who would allow a woman to touch him and anoint him in such a manner claim he could forgive sins? Certainty God could not be doing THAT new thing right in front of his eyes?

I spy a man I can sometimes be? How about you? The religious insider? The one who can give the good and churchy and right answers. The person of privilege from the right background with the right story and with the right education. Can you see yourself in Simon? Trying to do everything right and maybe sometimes missing the point? Trying to keep your mess-whatever your mess might be (because we all have it) hidden from the eyes of others in fear of embracement or judgement or loss of societal status. Do you ever fear and ignore and avoid what new way of being, new way of love, God is doing in our midst because we haven't always done it that way?

I spy with my little eyes Simon, the Pharisee.

OK, let's plan again...I spy with my littles eyes...a woman. Nameless to us. Named sinful by the other guests. I spy weeping, snot running down her nose, puffy eyes from all the tears, and repeated kissing of Jesus feet.

I see hair, down, flowing, and wiping away the snot and salty wet tears left from her crying. I see a bottle of perfumes costing a whole year worth of wages-something only saved for the anointing of a dead body-and an important one at that. I see the oily perfume pour over his feet.

Perhaps, the bottle is cracked wide open or maybe she threw it to the ground. I see the way she gazes at who she knew to be not just her friend. Not just a prophet but her God. I see her be vulnerable beyond words, a woman risking all that she has to interrupt this dinner party full of important men just so she can show her love and gratitude for her God. I see a woman who clearly had a reputation in town. A story everyone thought they knew. I see all eyes on her and yet no one really seeing her except one person.

Do you see her? Do you smell her perfume? Are you embarrassed by the way she is so provocatively touching Jesus? I spy a woman whose story is not totally foreign to me. A person who is a mess sometimes (aren't we all), I have heard too many stories of women and men and people who knows what it is to weep in front of those who didn't think that was is appropriate thing to do, to have all eyes on them and yet be not really seen or known even in the company of church folk.

I see a woman whose mess was too big for people to handle-even the church folk to handle -someone too messy for the religious scene and certainly perceived to be too messy for God.

I know those who live with stories everyone else thinks they understand or know. I have known women who were told that what they wore to worship is out of place or teenager girls shamed for what they wore. I spy a woman that showed up inspire of being told that their type of mess what not welcome.

I could tell you stories of people who stepped out of place, risked it all, to show their love and devotion to their God-and so many of the powerful ones missed the point. I see a woman who knows what mercy tastes like.

I spy someone who knows that grace isn't cheap, and that love is meant to embodied and sacrificial. I see a woman who knew without a shadow of a doubt this man she was anointing was God in flesh. A God who knew her whole story and mess and knew that in following him she would find the life abundant.

I also spy a woman is seems, who knew, as she anointed him like she was anointing a dead body of a king -any person who loved and truly saw people the way Jesus did-wouldn't stay alive long.

I spy, with my little eyes the unnamed woman.

It's interesting what we choose to see, and not, right? Who we see and not? What we can see and not? Who we include and exclude? What we call sin and not? What mess we deem acceptable or too much?

Friends, seeing others and seeing the world and seeing ourselves is a spiritual discipline...a way to practice our faith-truly seeing others matters-seeing their mess, seeing their humanity, seeing their gifts and story and belovedness...

My guess is each of us know the feeling of being seen (and of the opposite). Regardless, if it was in the boardroom or operating room or office or bedroom or classroom or kitchen table-when you're seen (just as you are mess and belovedness and all) it matters. And when we are in those same spaces and are present but not seen-we know how devastating that is to our spirits.

Truly, seeing another-for who they fully are-might get very close to what Jesus meant when he commanded us to love our neighbors. Or as Rev. Mister Rogers (one of my heroes) said, Love isn't a state of perfect caring. It is an active noun-like struggle. To love someone is to strive to accept that person exactly the way he or she is, right here and now.

Who and how we see others matters. Claiming that God sees-infection, mess, and all-fully as we are matters.

This discipline of seeing is part of the work of Lent and our journey of faith as we seek to follow Jesus. Practicing seeing others like Jesus, making room for the radical and revolutionary love of Jesus in this world will most certainly lead us to the cross and be so often completely misunderstood and unseen by the world. And yet, we are called to go and follow. This Lent out theme on Sundays is Love Without Limits-this love seen in this text and love shows by Jesus over and over again in Luke point the way for to the cross and to how we follow Jesus in our day to day lives.

So let's play one more time...ready?

I spy a man reclined around the table. A man with his own reputation around town-one that draws crowds and gawkers and enemies and disciples alike. A man who welcomes those others ignore. Who dines with the religious leaders even when they completely miss the point.

A man who invites in the women in the town to follow him to be his disciples...even those named sinful. A man who gave them brave space to show their extravagant love, faith, and gratitude.

I see a man that is both gentle and fierce and who sees beyond the mess of humanity and who is willing to love others and the world way beyond any of the limits and boundaries we create and draw so much so it will cost him his life. I spy a man who is not only a prophet but fulfills the promise of "God with us" from so long ago. And man- God's own self-made flesh- that is the only one who fully sees everyone in the room.

I spy with my little eyes-Jesus.

And friends...one more thing...in the Gospel of Matthew's account of this story- Jesus says that anywhere the gospel story is preached the story of the unnamed woman will shared too-that the whole story of God's radical love and work isn't complete without sharing the piece of the story of the unnamed work -May it be so. Amen.