

WPC  
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Do You See?  
Luke 7:36-8:3

My alma mater has a t.v. ad that's shown during football games. It shows images of campus life and states: "You see a place that's alive with purpose and passion. You see a place inspired by a long tradition of untraditional excellence. You see a place built by the people, for the people of California, the nation, and the world. What do you see? UC Berkeley." Of course, the ending is a word play with the letters UC (for University of California).

As a proud alum, I like this commercial. But I'm also aware that for those associated with rival schools, they don't see the same things as I do when they look at my school. They answer differently when asked, "What do you see?"

That happens a lot –it's amazing how people can see the same things differently. That's why we have 4 gospels, because they present four different viewpoints of the same events.

In the Gospel of Luke, it's clear Jesus is a prophet who's able to see things the rest of us often overlook. We often see people through the labels the world puts on them. Jesus sees the world through grace-full eyes.

In today's passage, Jesus is having dinner at the house of Simon the Pharisee, a good, religious man. In the middle of the meal a woman comes in and makes a scene, first weeping, then washing Jesus' feet with her tears, kissing them and drying them off with her hair, and finally anointing them with ointment.

Luke identifies her as "a woman in the city" and "a sinner." These two comments, along with the sensuousness of her actions, have led many to speculate that she was a prostitute. That may have been the case, but we don't know for sure. In any case, such speculation "has encouraged the church's historic conflation of this woman and Mary Magdalene, who is mentioned at the end of this Gospel reading ('from whom seven demons had gone out'). The identification of Mary Magdalene as a prostitute is also unwarranted." (Michael Lindvall)

When the Pharisee saw what this woman was doing, he said, "If this man were a real prophet, he would see what sort of woman this is. A sinner."

Jesus makes an interesting response to this charge. He says, “Simon, do you see this woman?”

The implication is that he doesn't really see this woman. He sees her but he doesn't see her as Jesus sees her. One commentator says, “He looks and sees someone with a label, someone who has been pigeon-holed as a ‘sinner.’ That’s all he sees. But when Jesus looks at this woman, he sees a ‘daughter of Abraham.’ She is also a member of the family. She also has a claim upon the goodness and mercy of God. He sees her differently than others see her.” (William Willimon, Pulpit Resource, 6-13-2010, p. 50) It’s a good reminder that there are different types of blindness, and Jesus helps recover sight for all of them.

When we start to see people as Jesus sees them, with grace-full eyes, we start to become more kind and compassionate.

When we talk about kindness, we’re talking about something outside us, that comes to us as a gift. Tom Long says, “In the Bible, before kindness is a way of acting, it’s a way of seeing other people, made possible only in the light of Jesus Christ. From now on, says Paul, we don’t look at other people from a human point of view. We see them in the light of Christ. We see them as God intends them to be.” The Jews have a wonderful saying: that if you had eyes to see, for every person you meet, you could see angels

in front of them announcing “Make way for the image of God, Make way for the image of God.” To see other people with grace-full eyes, in the light of Jesus Christ, is to see not only who they are in the moment, but who they will be in God’s future. “Kindness is a refusal to treat people according to how they’re seen in the light of culture, and an insistence on treating them in the light of Jesus Christ.”

What does it look like to see people as Jesus sees them? Let me share a few examples.

In the Presbyterian Church, in order to become a minister, you have to be tested on your theology. We take a candidate and put her/him in front of the whole presbytery, and anyone can ask this candidate any theological question as long as they want to ask it until they’re satisfied that the candidate is theologically solid.

A professor of mine once told the story of a minister in Mississippi who’s been asking the same question to ministerial candidates for over 35 years. He always waits until all the other questions have been asked. When the candidate is thoroughly exhausted, he stands up and says, “I have one more question.” Everybody knows what’s coming except the poor

candidate. He then says to the candidate, “Will you look out the window? Tell me when you see a person outside.”

“I see one.”

“Do you know that person personally?”

“No sir.”

“Good. Would you describe that person theologically.”

He’s been asking that question for over 35 years. He says that he finds over the years that he tends to get one of two answers. Either the ministerial candidate will say, “That person is a sinner, fallen, a rebel against God, in need of the redemptive blood of Jesus Christ,” or they will say, “That person, whether he knows it or not, is a child of God, embraced by the grace of God.”

The old minister says, “You know, I suppose both of those answers are theologically correct. But it has been my experience that those who give the second answer make the better ministers, because they see people not just as they are but as they will be in God’s future.” (story told by Tom Long)

Here's another story that I've shared with you before, but it illustrates really well what it means to see people with grace-full eyes: Tom Long tells a story of a friend who frequently flew in and out of Newark Airport, in New Jersey. Newark Airport is not only the home of U.S. Airways, Continental, and Delta, it's also the home of over 400 homeless people. You don't notice them when you're rushing to catch a plane, you don't really *see* them, but they're there.

His friend was at Newark Airport to catch a flight and it was delayed, so he sat down in the waiting room right across a snack bar. He noticed that the only person in the snack bar was one of these homeless people who was sitting with his head down on the table. Pretty soon, another person, a man who appeared to be the manager of the snack bar, made a beeline for that table, and his friend thought to himself, "Uh, oh, he's getting ready to bounce him."

But instead the manager, when he walked past the table, simply put a hot dog down in front of the man, and on his way back he put down a cup of coffee. It was just an act of kindness, simple kindness, sheer grace. But from the point of view of our faith, it was as if he had said, "Look, in a few minutes I'm going to have to play the role of the manager, and you're going to have to play the role of a homeless person, and I'm probably going to

have to ask you to leave. But for a moment, let us be who we will be. I see you as a child of God. Let us see God's Kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven. Welcome to the feast, brother. Welcome to the feast."

The crucified Christ is "a window through which we look upon the world." He gives us eyes to see things that the world often misses.

One preacher tells of a woman in his church who was telling him that every day on her walk to work she encountered a man standing on the street corner in tattered clothes, with his hand out, seeking money.

"When I first went to work there, I noticed him. But some months later, when one of my coworkers said to me, 'You know that old man that stands on the corner, every day, begging?'

'I said, 'But he isn't there anymore, is he? He used to be there, but now he's gone.'

"My coworker insisted that he was still there. The next morning on my way to work I was startled and shocked to see the old man standing there on the corner, just as he had always been, with his hand out. He had not moved or gone away. And yet my ability to see him had overlooked him, had been blinded. I no longer noticed him. It really became a spiritual challenge for me to realize that I had grown accustomed not to seeing him in my mind.

“The next day when I walked to work I left home a bit early, and I stood there and talked to the man for the first time. I found out that he was down on his luck, that he had once worked near that very street corner, and a lot of other information. At the end of our conversation, when I opened my pocketbook and pulled out a ten-dollar bill, he wouldn't take it. He said 'It was just good to talk to you this morning. That's the best thing that you can give me.'

“I believe that God sent that man to me to make me better at seeing people.”

May it also be so with us. Amen.