

## *Questions Jesus Asked sermon series*

### *“Do You See This Woman?”*

[Luke 7:36-50](#)

Jesus was a great teacher, and his teaching involved asking questions. He asked many more questions than he was asked, and often, his questions were not easy to answer but required serious reflection from his audience. This Lenten season, we are reflecting on some of the questions Jesus asked. So far, we have considered two of them: “What are you looking for?” and “What is your name?” Today, we turn to the third question: “Do you see this woman?” from the Gospel of Luke.

The story of the anointing woman Patty has read for us this morning is found in all 4 gospels. But, Luke’s version is quite different from the ones recorded in the other three gospels. According to Matthew, Mark and John, the anointing of Jesus takes place near the end of his life (Matthew 26:6-13; Mark, 14:3-9; John 12:1-8). But in Luke, it happens early in Jesus’ ministry. John names the woman who anoints Jesus as Mary, sister of Martha and Lazarus, and also locates the event at their house in Bethany. But Matthew, Mark and Luke do not give out her name, and names the location of the anointing as the house of Simon, more specifically, Simon the Leper in Matthew and Mark, and Simon the Pharisee in Luke.

Let’s set the scene for today’s scripture reading. Throughout his ministry, Jesus was at odds with the Pharisees, who were the experts on religious law at the time. They constantly criticized Jesus and tried to trap him with legal arguments. Meanwhile, Jesus pointed out their hypocrisy, which kept them from loving others who they judged as falling short of their strict religious legal standards. As the story opens, one of the Pharisees, whose name is Simon, invites Jesus into his home to dine with him. Luke does not tell us why he invited Jesus to his house. But, we can guess that he wanted to get to know Jesus, the new Rabbi in town and have a theological debate with him.

When Jesus entered the house and took a seat at the dinner table, a woman, who is described as simply a sinner, came into the room and created a scene. She stood behind Jesus at his feet and began to weep. When his feet got wet with her tears, she used her hair to dry them. Then, she kissed his feet and poured perfumed oil on them. What scandalous behavior! What she did was inappropriate at best. According to the oral tradition of the law, a woman could be divorced if she let her hair down in public before another man.

Can you imagine the reactions of the men in the room? Of course, they were appalled. The intimate act of the woman toward Jesus would have been shocking even in our modern times. Yet, no one in the room said anything about it, as if they did not see her, as if she was not even in the room.

Simon, the dinner host, was also shocked by the woman’s behavior and thought 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.' Perhaps, Simon's previous encounters with Jesus or the stories he had heard about him had led him to believe that Jesus was a prophet, someone who enjoys a closeness with God, someone who knows the heart of God, someone who is worthy of his time and attention. And so, imagine the disappointment and embarrassment he feels when he sees his prized dinner guest, Jesus allowing this woman, a sinner, to touch him. Holy men, like Simon, were not supposed to associate with sinners let alone allow them to physically touch them. Like all the other holy men in the room, his response to the situation was to keep silent. Pretend like this was not happening that they neither saw the sinful woman nor Jesus in the room. However, Jesus breaks the silence. He knows what is in Simon's heart, the judgmental thoughts running through his head. Jesus asks Simon, "Do you see this woman?" It's a rhetorical question because he knows that Simon, like the rest of the men at the table cannot see this woman.

In Jewish society of the first century, women were considered to be the property of men. Their place was to be in the home, and some people thought women should never leave the home except to go to the synagogue. Men were not to greet women in public, and women were not allowed to be in the same room with men. At the Jerusalem temple, women were restricted to an outer court, and in synagogues, they were separated from the men and not permitted to read aloud. According to the law of Moses, women were considered to be "unclean," so they were not allowed to bear witness in a religious court. The daily prayers of Jewish men included this line: "Praise be to God that he has not created me a woman."

Indeed, Simon saw the woman, but he saw her through the lenses of the gender-exclusive culture of his time and through the filters of restrictions imposed on women by his society. He saw the woman from his own place of privilege and status, from his prejudices. In addition, he saw the woman for her past. He viewed the actions of the woman through the label people gave her - a sinner. And so Simon saw what kind of woman she was. But, that was not the way Jesus saw the woman. He saw her as she was, not for who she used to be, but for who she is now, as forgiven and healed, as brave and passionate, as gifted and generous.

In fact, throughout his entire ministry, Jesus refused to treat women as inferior to men, going against the cultural views of women in his time. He counted women as descendants of Abraham by calling them "daughters of Abraham." The title had never been given to women before. Jesus refused to view women as unclean and treated them with respect and compassion. He healed and spoke to women in public. Jesus taught not only men but also women. Jesus welcomed and empowered women for ministry. The disciples who followed Jesus to death on the cross were women, and women became the first witnesses of his resurrection.

As we learned last fall through the sermon series on our denominational heritage, the pioneers of Methodism highly valued women's gifts and voices, and women's leadership in the church has grown over the years, especially through the ministry of the United Methodist Women. This women's organization that started with 8 women 150 years ago now has 800,000 members around the world. Continuing the vision of its founders, the United Methodist Women strives to positively impact the lives of women, children and youth in the United States and abroad.

On its website, the mission of the UMW is described this way: “Mission is presence, relationship, witness, and sharing. Mission is refusing to turn away when the tears of God are being shed over the violence and injustice and suffering of God’s wayward creation.” Then, the mission of the UMW is well aligned with the mission of Jesus Christ, who never turned away from the places of violence, injustice, and suffering of God’s impoverished, oppressed, and wounded children. He healed the sick, fed the hungry, clothed the naked, cast out evil spirits and liberated people from the bondage of sin.

“Do you see this woman?” Jesus asked Simon the Pharisee, who despised the woman who was anointing Jesus because she was a sinner. He was asking him, “Do you see this person whom you have dismissed by your moral standards and theological doctrines? Do you see this woman, labeled a sinner and defined as unclean? Do you see this woman, just as she is, beyond your religious belief, cultural dogma and ideology? Do you see this woman?”

I have to admit that I often choose not to see. After all, there is a cost to seeing. If you actually see this woman, if you look into her eyes, you might need to move beyond your stereotypes and prejudices about her. You might have to stop simply labeling her “a sinner.” You might have to call her by name and relate to her as a person. You might have to respond to her with compassion.

That’s what I witnessed yesterday when Rev. Alyss Swanson and I joined a group of people in the acts of distributing food, water, clothes, shoes, and blankets to the persons experiencing homelessness in San Jose. The conditions of the people who came out to get food and find the items they needed in the pile of donated items were so poor. Their clothes were very dirty and smelly. Yet, as we lingered around them for a while at each site, we began to converse with some of them. I overheard one of the volunteers who had been regularly participating in the distribution for several years telling one of the people who came, “Do not lose your hope. God loves you. May God bless you.” In response, she said to her, “Thank you! Thank you very much! God bless you, too.” I saw her eyes welling up with tears, tears of compassion. And, I saw the homeless person’s eyes also welling up with tears, tears of gratitude.

“Do you see this woman?” Jesus’ question forces us to look where we do not want to look. Do you see this woman? Do you see her walking through cars on the traffic stop, holding a sign that says, “Help!”? Do you see this woman? Do you see her sleeping with her children in the car parked on the streets? Do you see this woman? Do you see her, crossing the southern border with her children, running from danger and hoping for a new future in a foreign land? Do you see this woman? Do you see her walking the streets late at night, looking for men who would buy her body for sexual pleasure, so that she can feed her family? Do you see this woman?

May we see her through the eyes of faith. May we see her through the eyes of God’s love and compassion. May we see her and our other neighbors as Jesus sees them -- as a daughter of God, as children of God. May we be liberated from the bondage of sin, the bondage of fears, which keeps us from seeing. Thanks be to God! Amen.