

Sermons at First Church

A Ministry of the Word
June 13, 2010

First Presbyterian Church
Clarksburg, WV

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Luke 7:36-50

(Jesus) said to Simon, "Do you see this woman?" (Luke 7:44 N.R.S.V.)

Do You See?

I am a child of God. I believe in Jesus Christ as my Lord and my Savior. And I believe he has the power to change my life.

Things are not always as they seem. Before the current war, Barbara Walters did a story on gender roles in Afghanistan. She noted that women customarily walked five paces behind their husbands.

More recently Walters returned to Afghanistan and noted that in spite of the overthrow of the oppressive Taliban regime, women now still walk behind their husbands, and seem happy to maintain the old custom.

Walters approached one of the Afghani women and asked, "Why do you now seem happy with an old custom that you once tried so desperately to change?"

The woman looked her straight in the eyes and without hesitation said, "Land Mines."
(Timothy Anger, Merry-hearts-subscribe@listmonger.net)

Things are not always as they seem. So many times we see, but we don't really see.

Time and again in scripture, Jesus gives sight to the blind. He heals physical blindness, but he heals spiritual blindness as well. In our text from Luke, Jesus is eating a meal at the home of a pharisee named Simon. While he is eating, a woman wanders in off the street. This woman comes close to Jesus, she is so overcome with emotion that she begins to weep. Her tears fall on Jesus' feet. The woman lets down her hair to wipe off the tears, and then uses an expensive perfume or lotion to ease our Lord's tired and aching feet.

This woman is apparently well known to Simon and his friends as a notorious sinner. Likely that means she was a prostitute. Simon is shocked that Jesus would allow his person to be touched and thus contaminated by this dirty sinner. He says in one of those loud stage whispers that are meant to be overheard. "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who is touching him- that she is a sinner."

Jesus answers, "Simon, do you see this woman?"

The obvious answer is "no." Simon does not really see this woman as a person of value, the way Jesus does. Simon sees only a label. "Sinner"

We too are guilty of the same kind of spiritual blindness. We see but not really. Certainly we don't see as God sees.

There is a famous story from the middle ages about a learned monk and teacher named Militus. Militus, for whatever reason, decided to leave his teaching position and wander around Europe as a beggar. One day in a strange city far from home, he was overcome by sickness and passed out in an alley. He came to still wearing his ragged, stinking clothing, but lying on a clean bed in what passed for a hospital in those days.

A couple of doctors were standing near the bed discussing his case in Latin. In those days only the highly educated could speak Latin, and they felt safe that this bum could not understand what they were saying. One of the doctors said, "Let's experiment on this worthless fellow."

At which point Militus answered them in their own learned language. "Call no man worthless for whom Christ has died."

One of the gifts the Holy Spirit gives to us as Christians is to help us to see others as Christ sees them. We might think of this gift as a new pair of glasses, a God lens if you will. As we read the scriptures, as we study the examples of Jesus, as we are inspired by the Holy Spirit- we learn to see people differently. Strangers become real to us.

This makes me think about the time I was walking through Wal-Mart several years ago. I saw a man coming toward me down the aisle, but I wasn't paying much attention. He said hi, and I responded with an automatic "hi" back. Then he spoke to me and called me by name. Suddenly everything changed, I recognized him as a friend that I hadn't seen for a long time. He was suddenly real to me in a way that he hadn't been before.

Most everybody has had that experience, believers and non-believers alike. But there are times when the Holy Spirit prompts us as Christians, so that strangers who are not old friends also become suddenly real and important to us. By grace we are enabled to see them as people of value and worth. Worthy of our attention, of our time, of our love.

Jesus said, "Simon do you see this woman? Do you really see her?"

Friends we need a lot of help in this department, because we seem determined to ignore a large percentage of the people around us. We see them, but not really.

Many years ago, Charla was involved in a severe car accident. She spent three weeks in the hospital and three months in rehabilitation. During her rehabilitation she spent a good deal of time sitting in a wheelchair. She was shocked to find that being in a wheelchair makes you invisible to many people.

Charla was slowly recovering but she still retained her outgoing personality. She would be sitting in the hallway of the rehab hospital waiting for her next therapy session, and she would smile and say hello to all of the people who came down the hallway. The hospital staff would almost always respond with a word and a smile, but visitors to the hospital would frequently ignore her. They would walk right past refusing to look at her.

When she related that story to me, I realized that I was guilty of doing the same thing in the nursing homes I visited. When the residents, many of them in wheelchairs would stretch out their hands to me and say, “Come here, come here” I assumed that they were not in their right mind and ignored them.

As a result this conversation, I resolved that I would make a special effort to speak to people in wheelchairs, especially in nursing homes. What I discovered was that most of them were not out of their minds. They would calm right down when I took their hands and ask them what they needed. Sometimes they wanted something simple like being pushed a few feet down the hall to their room. Other times they wanted to complain about being stuck there, and wanted to go home. But mostly they were starved for a human touch, for the assurance that they were not invisible, that they were worthy of a moment of my time.

On a few occasions I have encountered people who hang on to my hand and refuse to let go. They talk, but it is a steady stream of nonsense. I’ve learned to deal with that too. I just listen politely for a minute or two, speak to them warmly and gently pull my hand away. They don’t really have the strength to trap me. And I’m convinced that they often do hear me and appreciate my holding their hand, even if it doesn’t show on the surface.

Jesus said to Simon, “Do you see this woman?”

We need the help of the Holy Spirit because we are afraid. We deliberately ignore those who are hurting because we would rather not get involved. Hurting people seem like fly paper to us, all sticky and clingy, we are afraid they will demand too much from us. We not only refuse to look at them, but sometimes we convince ourselves that they aren’t even there.

One Christian woman was telling about a man standing on the street corner in tattered clothes, with his hand out, seeking money. She encountered him there on the same corner every morning when she walked to work.

This woman says, “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 been blinded. I no longer noticed him. It really became a spiritual challenge for me to realize that I had grown accustomed to not seeing him in my mind.”

The woman made up her mind to change this situation. So the next morning she left for work early and stopped to talk to this man. She found out that he was out of a job, down on his luck, and that he had once worked near that very street corner, and a lot of other information. At the end of the conversation, she reached in her 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.”

The woman ends her story by saying, “I believe that God sent that man to me to make me better at seeing people.” (Pulpit Resource, April, May, June 2010, pg. 51)

Jesus says, “Simon do you see this woman?” Then he pushes the lesson a bit more. He asks which of two debtors, one who is forgiven a great debt and one who is forgive a very small debt- which will be the most grateful? And Simon says, the one forgiven the large debt.

So Jesus points out that this woman whom Simon calls a sinner is very grateful because she has been forgiven much. But Simon shows little evidence of gratitude because he thinks he doesn’t need forgiveness. “Simon do you see? Do you see that you too are a sinner just as much in need of forgiveness?”

One pastor tells of noticing two men taking communion side by side one Sunday morning. The one man was a convicted criminal who while in jail had been converted and given his life to Christ. The other man was the judge who had sent the first man to jail for stealing.

After church the pastor was talking to the judge and mentioned that he had noticed the two of them taking communion side by side. “Yes,” said the judge, “what a marvelous act of grace.”

“Yes,” responded the pastor, “God has worked wonders in that man’s life.”

“I was talking about myself,” said the judge. “Look it didn’t cost the burglar that much to get converted when he came out of jail. He had nothing but a history of crime behind him, and when he saw Jesus as his Savior he knew that there was salvation and hope and joy for him. And he knew how much he needed that help.

“But look at me. I was taught from earliest infancy to live as a gentleman; that my word was to be my bond; that I was to say my prayers, go to church, take Communion and so on. I went through Oxford, took my degrees, was called to the bar and eventually became a judge.

“Pastor, nothing but the grace of God could have caused me to admit that I was a sinner on a level with the burglar. It took much grace to forgive me for all my pride and self deception, to get me to admit that I was no better in the eyes of God than that convict that I sent to jail.”

(Illustrations Unlimited, pg. 257, Cited by Allen G. Hern)

Simon do you see?

Amen.