

Great Love for God and Neighbor
(Lent 2)

Prayer of Illumination

Present God,

Settle our hearts.

Still our minds.

And stir our imaginations,

That we might hear your Word for us this day. Amen.

Luke 7:36-50

One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and when he went into the Pharisee's house he reclined to dine. And 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. She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair, kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment.

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." Jesus spoke up and said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." "Teacher," he replied, "speak."

"A certain moneylender had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he canceled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?" Simon answered, "I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt." And Jesus said to him, "You have judged rightly."

Then 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. 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.

Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven loves little." Then he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?" But he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

Matthew 25:35-40

... for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord,

when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me.'

The Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Great Love for God and Neighbor

One of the hot topics on the school board recently has been a return to the question of cell phones in schools: should they be allowed in the classroom? Should they be allowed in the building? It's a complicated question with more variables than I would have anticipated, but what I have found most surprising in our research and conversations isn't the data on test scores or discipline, it's an anecdotal note that when cell phones are banned for the entire day, the volume in the cafeteria goes up—noticeably, almost disruptively so. Without phones, kids talk to one another.

It turns out that screens are not only distracting our kids from learning, they're distracting them from each other.

And it's not just kids. We, too, use screens as a buffer—sometimes intentionally, more often without even noticing. It's not simply a matter of willpower or discipline: the world we live in is designed to keep us looking down—notifying us, alerting us, demanding our attention. And while we're looking down, we're being trained to react quickly, to decide instantly, to take sides before we've even taken a breath: good, bad; liberal, conservative; boomer, millennial. We live in a world where headlines train us to react, social media trains us to categorize, and politics trains us to divide. We sort people into categories. We rely on stereotypes to help us process the overwhelming flood of information we consume every day.

We don't do this out of malice. We do it out of survival. How else are we supposed to manage the constant stream of information coming at us? Most of the time we're not even aware we're doing it. It's just the air we breathe.

But while our age of information overload and technological advances have made it even harder to look up, the truth is that we've always had a hard time seeing one another. We are a people too easily given to reacting quickly and seeing shallowly. But great love for God and neighbor cannot grow in shallow sight.

We need look no further than our story from Luke this morning. A Pharisee named Simon invites Jesus to his house for dinner. While they are reclining at the table, a woman—whom

Luke simply describes her as a 'sinner'—learns that Jesus is there. She brings an alabaster jar of ointment, kneels at his feet, and begins to bathe them with her tears, drying them with her hair, kissing them, anointing them with perfume.

It is a strange, slightly uncomfortable scene. It's hard to read it without squirming just a little. The intimacy of it, the physicality of it. It's vaguely inappropriate. It was certainly socially disruptive.

And so it's not entirely surprising when Simon does what we so often do when we're uncomfortable: he decides he already knows who she is. Rather than leaning in with curiosity, Simon leans back into certainty. He decides her past is her whole story.

But Simon doesn't say anything. He doesn't act out. He doesn't humiliate her. He simply thinks, "if this man were a prophet, he would know what kind of woman this is." And if we're honest, wouldn't we have thought something similar?

What's disconcerting is that Jesus seems to know. Though Simon has said nothing out loud, Jesus turns and addresses him, telling a story that reframes how Simon sees the woman. A certain moneylender had two debtors. One owed him a little and the other owed him a lot. When neither could pay, the moneylender forgave both debts. Who, Jesus asks Simon, do you think will love the moneylender more?

It's a question with an obvious answer and Simon gives it reluctantly: I suppose the one for whom the greater debt was cancelled.

Then turning to the woman, Jesus asks Simon, do you see this woman? Do you see this woman? Or do you see a category? A stereotype? A past?

It's worth pausing here, because if we're honest, most of us would have seen what Simon saw. We would have known that this woman was not the kind of person who belonged in this room. We would have felt the discomfort of her presence and reached, almost instinctively, for the category that allowed us to dismiss her: she's a sinner, of course she's making a scene.

We do this all the time. We see the person whose politics we can guess from their bumper sticker and we decide we already know who they are and what they think. We see the people we love most—our partners, our children, our oldest friends—and we stop really looking, assuming we already know them, missing the ways they are changing and growing right in front of us. We see the person who is visibly struggling and we decide we already know their story. We reduce people to the category they represent, or the version of them we first met, or the way they make us feel, and we call it seeing.

But Jesus asks something harder. To really see this woman—to see past the social disruption of her presence, past the labels assigned to her, past her history—would require that Simon stay

in the discomfort of her presence rather than retreat from it. It would require him to let go of the certainty that has kept him at a distance. And it would require him to look again — not quickly, not categorically, but with the kind of open attention that might actually let her matter. That is no small thing.

Simon has seen a sinner. But Jesus wants him to see a woman who has been moved by forgiveness and mercy. Simon isn't cruel. He isn't mean. He isn't even wrong about her past. He simply sees the woman the way the world trains us to see people: quickly, categorically, without curiosity.

But Jesus came to bring good news. The good news in this story doesn't end with one woman's sins being forgiven. The good news is what that forgiveness makes possible: the love this woman pours out at Jesus' feet; the love Jesus tries to awaken in Simon by helping him to see more clearly. Because great love for God and neighbor cannot grow in shallow sight.

If Luke invites us to see one woman differently, Matthew shows us what that kind of sight makes possible in the world.

Our text from Matthew comes in the middle of a prophetic vision of the end of the age. The Son of Man has gathered the nations before him and begins to separate them. To those he places on his right, he offers the kingdom of heaven because "I was hungry and you gave me food. I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me."

And those he blesses are surprised. They were not scanning the crowd for Christ. They were not calculating spiritual reward. They simply saw the person in front of them and let that person make a claim on them. They refused to reduce the hungry to statistics or the stranger to a threat. Where Simon leaned back into certainty, they leaned forward into compassion. Only later did they realize what they were really doing: Just as you did it to one of the least of these, you did it to me. They loved their neighbor, and in loving their neighbor, they loved God. Great love for God and neighbor asks us to lean into curiosity rather than retreat into judgment. It asks us to see as Jesus sees.

Jesus looks at the woman and refuses to reduce her to her past. He looks at Simon and does not reduce him to his certainty. He sees us in all of our complexity and does not look away.

Jesus doesn't shame Simon. He doesn't dismiss him. He tells him a story. He invites him deeper. In the same way, Jesus doesn't dwell on the woman's past. He doesn't rehearse her sins. He names her love. Jesus looks at each of us and sees in us more than we can see in ourselves, and he calls us toward it. He never stops inviting us to look again, to see more clearly both ourselves and the people God places in front of us.

We live in a world that trains us to react quickly and see shallowly. But great love cannot grow in shallow sight.

So this week, look again.

Look at the person in front of you—the one you are tempted to categorize, the one you think you already know—and lean in with curiosity. Let them make a claim on you. Let their humanity interrupt your certainty. Because our world desperately needs people who are willing to look deeper. People who know that in the face of the neighbor, we find the face of God.