

The story of the woman anointing Jesus' feet appears in the other gospels, but with variations. In the other three, it happens shortly before his entry into Jerusalem, where he is to die, and it serves as an anointing before death. In John's gospel, the woman is Mary of Bethany, a good friend. In Mark and Matthew, she is not named, nor is she called a sinner. Also in Mark and Matthew, the dinner is at the house of Simon, called "the leper," not Simon called "one of the Pharisees," although it could certainly be the same man. But I want to point out these differences, because Luke's story is not the same as the others, and I don't want assumptions about one to bleed into this one.

It has been widely assumed that the nature of the woman's sinfulness was sexual, and I really can't imagine why except that Biblical scholars through the ages were men who saw women primarily as sexual beings. It may be that, but I'm not going to make that assumption because I'm *really* tired of it and Luke doesn't say it. I don't know why she couldn't be a sinner because she steals, or because she's poor and can't keep some of the laws, or because she is a nasty rich lady who charges interest on debts. The point is that she is a sinner and everybody knows it, including herself.

The significance of Simon being a Pharisee is that he was a conscientious, faithful and thoughtful Jew who wanted to know more about Jesus' ideas. He invited Jesus over to have a discussion, an exchange of ideas, a meeting of minds. This is no trap, or even a hostile environment; Simon wants to explore Jesus' thinking. But in breaks this unnamed woman with an alabaster jar of ointment, who makes a big emotional scene crying on Jesus' feet, kissing them, and anointing them. It would

have been just as embarrassing and awkward then as it would be today, and Simon has to be annoyed that his dinner party is disrupted by this woman who frankly has not earned the right to be there. “She was warned. She was given an explanation. Nevertheless, she persisted.”

Oh my land, what breathtaking condescension.

Because Luke does not place this story right before the entry into Jerusalem, and so does not frame it as anointing before death, we have to take it at face value, as an extravagant gesture of love and gratitude for something wonderful that she attributes to Jesus. This woman is weeping, she’s spilling out expensive ointment on his feet, she’s unable to speak, she’s so overcome with emotion. Jesus has said or done something that has changed her life, and she has to respond. I have to confess that I would probably have reacted like Simon, because I don’t change gears easily, and when I have my mind set on a nice dinner and discussion, I’m going to be annoyed and upset to have my plans derailed.

This is an Epiphany text because it’s all about seeing. Simon thinks that Jesus must not be a prophet because he acts like he can’t see that she’s a sinner. Jesus says to Simon, “Do you see this woman?” And the woman apparently is also a prophet, because she *sees* Jesus as more than an interesting dinner companion.

Simon does not *see* the woman. He sees an annoying interruption. But she is a person with a story and a capacity for embodied love. For that matter, he doesn’t entirely see Jesus either, because he failed to offer Jesus the comfort of a footbath before they sat down to dinner. The woman does see, and when Jesus says to her, “Your faith has saved you,” the only thing he could be referring to is her act of

extravagant hospitality: weeping, anointing, bathing, wiping, kissing, showing love. Faith is not belief here; faith is this heartfelt response to something that Jesus meant to her. And “saved” here also means “healed,” “rescued,” “made whole.” Her heartfelt response has made her whole.

Simon the Pharisee is not a bad guy. But he has his categories all set, and he sees what he’s prepared to see. It occurred to me last Sunday after I showed the kids that video of the people dribbling the basketball, when I was so surprised that they hadn’t said anything when the gorilla walked in, that they hadn’t bothered to comment because the gorilla hadn’t disrupted their expectations. I told them to count how many times the white team passed the ball, which they did better than I had when I first watched the video, and apparently having a gorilla walk in was not so peculiar that they would stop counting. This kind of openness is one of the reasons we need these kids around here. Simon could have used kids like them in his life, because he has firm expectations, firm categories into which people fit, and it keeps him from seeing what else is there. The woman stepped outside of the way she had been defined, and was liberated.

The story ends there. We are not told what else Jesus may have said to Simon, nor how Simon responded. In essence, the story dumps itself into our laps. It asks us, Can we go beyond our expectations and habits, to be made whole? What habits or ways of being are freeing for us, and what definitions of ourselves keep us in bondage? Can we live in a grace-filled way that invites others to be more than what they have been defined as?

Last week Ron and Ann and I went to that meeting at Norwalk Christian

Church to discuss issues facing households in Warren County. The staffer for AMOS (A Mid-Iowa Organizing Strategy) was there and gave us a brief description of their philosophy. AMOS members are organizations (like churches), not individuals, and they take action on specific issues that they identify as important in their own communities. I was particularly interested in AMOS at this moment because we have a better chance of taking effective action locally than at the state or federal level, not that we should back off there. But one AMOS principle is, “no permanent allies, no permanent enemies.” In other words, you work with whoever will work with you. If, say, the Chamber of Commerce opposes us on one issue, that doesn’t mean we won’t reach out to them again on another issue that they might support.

In this toxic, polarized environment, that seems like a really healthy principle to adhere to. I had earlier asked Steve to share a chance to sign onto a faith leaders letter opposing the immigration ban, and he had shared with me some pushback he got from one person, who asked, “Don’t you lock your doors at night?” as if immigrants were burglars or varmints. It took me about half a second to go into full rage mode—fortunately I was at home at my computer, not where anybody could see me—and *hate* the bigoted, ignorant, complacent, self-righteous jerk who is probably infecting his own faith community irresponsibly with these toxic and anti-Christian ideas. Now, I know better, and I wouldn’t lead with that kind of assessment, but boy, it sure lies close to the surface! What the AMOS principle reminds me is, if we decide we really want to work on mental health services in Warren County, or on youth services, this very colleague might be an ally. Not on helping immigrants, but on other things. Quite possibly, it is not necessary for me to

pronounce a final character summary on him anyway. I need to live in a grace-filled way that recognizes that he *is* more than what I have defined him as. And if he does not reciprocate, that doesn't change a thing. Grace is not transactional; we have all received it as a gift.

No permanent allies, no permanent enemies. It's not a bad working theory for apprentice Christians, non-experts, sentient beings of impure karma as the Buddhists would say. It leaves open the possibility of seeing what *really* is, one epiphany after another.

Let us pray. In the actions of a woman weighed down with love and with nothing to give but herself and her reputation, in the reaction of a man heavy with pride and quick to condemn, we understand why we need your healing. Today, God, we lay at your feet ourselves and all we might be in the world, for there we find direction. Thank you. Amen.