

Do You See This Woman?

A Sermon from Mount Auburn Presbyterian Church

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**Scripture Readings: 2 Samuel 11:26 - 12:10, 13-15; Psalm 32;
Galatians 2:15-21; Luke 7:36-8:3**

I could do a lot of talking about the story in 1 Kings, where Jezebel connives to get Naboth's vineyard for her husband, the corrupt and inept King Ahab. It's a pretty cool story about a foreign princess with a sense of entitlement and no respect for the more democratic economic system of the Hebrew people. Jezebel, who saw Naboth not as a person, but as an obstacle to getting what she wanted (the land to which she thought she was entitled) managed to get her way, and while Ahab should have known better, it was the prophet Elijah who had to tell him how the cow chewed the cud.

Or I could talk about the Pharisee, Simon, and his unhappiness at having his party disrupted by a loose woman slopping ointment on Jesus in that disgraceful scene. We could be asking some questions about just how Simon knew she was a sinner. Or I could talk about the parable Jesus told about the creditor and the debtors . . . a story that probably meant so much more to his audience, in that day and time, in an occupied country, when an unjust economic system made it possible for the wealthy to levy heavy taxes on the small landowners, until they were forced out of their homes and off their farms, debt was serious business.

A time in which widows and orphans were forced to beg, and in many cases, were reduced to prostitution.

I think only those who have lived under the burden of a huge debt load could understand what it means to have debts forgiven. Cancelled. To get a new lease on life. That parable must have had hit their ears like rain falling on drought-parched land.

But we don't have all day.

So, I'll cut to the chase.

The whole of scripture is about worship. Or more specifically, worshipping God. When I say that, I'm not talking about the order of worship, or the kinds of hymns we sing or what color robes the choir wears. Or even how moved you may or may not be by my sermon.

Worship is about values.

Worship is from a root word which means 'to worth.' To value. What/whom do we value? What matters most to us? What we do here each Sunday is meant to help remind us that as God's people; we value God most. Just coming here on a Sunday morning when we could be doing a number of other things is an act of valuing God over all other things.

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Giving our time, pouring out a portion of our lives reminds us that we are to give all our time and our whole being to worship God.

These long and complex stories from the Hebrew scriptures and from the gospel have at their heart that very thing: whom/what do we value above all else?

From the first, the temptation of Adam and Eve was to value their own desires, their own hungers more than they valued God . . . and so they ate the fruit . . . a metaphor for our constant struggle.

The stories this morning make this point:

If we value the Holy One above all else, it will reorder our priorities. Everyone and everything else will be seen in a different light. It changes the way we relate to ourselves and to creation and to other human beings.

The relationship between an individual and others reveals something very powerful about the individual's relationship with God.

And we find that the reverse is also true: an individual's relationship with God reveals something powerful about that individual's relationship with other human beings.

If we worship God, we will value God's children. All of God's children. When we are valuing God's children, it is a form of worshipping God.

And valuing – or loving our neighbors – is not simply a matter of feeling warm and fuzzy about them: it is a practical matter: it is measured by the way we behave toward them. If we value God, we will treat others with justice economically, we will treat others with compassion, and we will treat others in a respectful manner. To not do so is seen as separation not just from our neighbor, but from God.

This is tricky business, community.

To stand in judgment is to stand over, to look down upon; not to see one another eyeball to eyeball.

But to close our eyes to the injustice that others may do, the harm that others may do to others, is not valuing all God's children, either.

Community calls us to be responsible to one another: to seek both justice and mercy.

When Simon, the Pharisee, judges both Jesus and the woman anointing his feet with oil, Jesus asks this question:

Do you see this woman? Do you see who she is? Do you care about her life? Do you know her story? Have you seen her? Have you treated her with justice and mercy?

That's the question with which we need to struggle. Do we see and value our neighbor? Do we treat all our neighbors with justice and mercy?

I want to tell you a story about something that happened in the last church I served when the congregation there took the time to see one another, and to take seriously what it means to be the body of Christ.

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It wasn't easy to see Sharon at first.

When she first came to church, she sat near the door, and slipped out before any one could greet her. I could see her from the pulpit, and I knew she didn't fit in, to be quite honest. I hate to admit how classist that sounds, but what I want to say is that she looked different. She wasn't as tidy as most of the folks in the pews.

It was not a snobby church. But the folks were middle class, even if blue collar.

Sharon was not middle class. She had grown up in poverty and she still lived pretty close to the edge. I found out later that she was the first in her family to get a high school education. Her parents big dream was to own their own trailer some day. She would never own even that.

I was surprised to see her come back. But she did, and eventually people greeted her warmly and soon, Sharon was coming every Sunday and bringing her whole family. Her two sons had ADHD and they were undisciplined and disruptive. The husband, a ne'er do well and extremely lazy fellow, yelled at the boys a lot, and made some very inappropriate comments. The older daughter, who had a child out of wedlock was, as young people can be, alternately sullen and charming.

There were a few folks in the congregation who responded much as the Pharisee did. Not so much because they were sinners, but because they were an intrusion on our otherwise polite dinner party conversation. There was that normal discomfort raised by differences.

There was some patronizing talk about fixing dental problems and offering money to help them look more 'like us.' We let it go and decided to deal with our own discomfort as our issue, not Sharon's.

Sharon was patient with us and she kept coming and what started out as tolerance turned to acceptance and then to deep affection. She became an integral part of the church. We learned to see her. She was bright and funny and creative and a very hard worker, generous with her time and energy. We were all aware of the fact that although she lived hand to mouth, and a car repair or an illness or an unexpected bill could throw her into a financial crisis, she didn't often ask for help.

There were some unexplainable things, and some mysteries.

After ten years, the secret came out.

The congregation received a letter telling us that she had committed a crime many years ago, before coming to this church, she admitted her guilt, and was given time to make things right. She hadn't done that, and now, she was in jail, awaiting a prison term of between two to ten years.

She asked that the congregation pray for her, write to her, and stay in touch with her children.

The fuller story was that she was working in an office for a lawyer, making not much more than minimum wage, and barely getting by as the sole support of the family because her husband was unable to keep a job.

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After a few years, Sharon's supervisor, the office manager, was getting ready to retire, and informed the employer that Sharon was bright enough to learn how to run the office and manage the books, and that she would train her. Sharon picked it up quickly, and took over when the older woman left. Because Sharon did the books, she had seen how much the previous manager made and was hoping there would be a raise with her promotion. It was not forthcoming. After many months, she decided it was just an oversight, so she asked the lawyer about it. He told her that the previous manager had a master's degree and had been with the lawyer a long time and Sharon, without a degree, and having only been there five years, wasn't really entitled to a raise.

In the meantime, Sharon was having a very hard time making ends meet.

One month, a medical crisis put her in desperation, so she 'borrowed' some money to pay the rent from the accounts at the office, thinking she would pay it back at the end of the month.

That's right: she embezzled the money.

You know what happened after that --- the snowball effect . . . only it's more like quicksand . . . not only was she not able to pay it back with the first paycheck, she had to borrow more . . .

There was some almost maniacal thing that went on . . . some kind of illusion that blocked reality. That thing that happens when we lose touch with reality. A bite of an apple here, a lie there . . . after all, Naboth, too, only wanted some fresh veggies . . .

On one level, Sharon was in denial about the risks and on another she was able to give her family things she had never been able to give them. (When one is poor, money is for spending.)

What we also know (because we've all done things we know are wrong) is the worry, the sleepless nights, the self-loathing, the fear and dread . . . and even the justification . . . sin is a separation. From ourselves. From reality. From others. From God.

After a year, she had stolen over \$40,000.

She wasn't 'discovered.'

She couldn't stand it any more. She had bleeding ulcers.

She confessed.

The lawyer was furious, as he had every right to be. (Even a jerk doesn't deserve to be robbed.)

He pressed charges.

She couldn't afford a lawyer, and was provided one by the state.

She pleaded guilty and was given ten years of parole to pay back the money at \$375 a month.

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After ten years, she had only been able to pay back \$25,000.

(Which I thought was amazing, given the circumstances.

In order to get a higher paying job in the company where she worked, she would have to go to some training in a city about 300 miles away for 2 weeks. According to her parole, she couldn't cross the county line. Poverty is it's own form of quicksand.)

She kept this a secret because she didn't think anyone in the church would be able to forgive her. She thought they would think less of her.

She knew she was wrong for stealing the money, wrong for not paying it back, and believed she deserved prison. She couldn't forgive herself.

She was looking for a way to absolve her guilt. To atone.

The lawyer was now deceased, but that only added to her pain.

After receiving the letter, the 40 member congregation gathered, with but one question: What can we do?

The pastor and an elder were charged to speak to Sharon and her new, court appointed lawyer.

They told the lawyer of Sharon's character, her value to the church, their willingness to help in any possible way, and they said they didn't think it would really serve the world to have Sharon in prison for a few years.

The lawyer told the judge of the congregation's support.

The judge said, "If the church can come up with \$10,000 in 3 months, it will all be over. No prison. No more parole." Debt forgiven.

The lawyer, thinking 40 people was a small church, said, shaking her head, "That's a lot of bake sales. I think I can get her the minimum sentence. Two years is not such a very long time."

But the church met again and talked about what the judge said.

They discussed matters thoroughly. Was it rescuing? Was it co-dependent? If we do this will she feel obligated to them? They talked about making the money a loan.

By the end they were clear. We have to do this because we can, and she can't. And that day they raised \$10,000. One woman had taken money out of her savings, another had borrowed money herself. There were no 'deep pockets' in the congregation. It was a five loaves and two fishes kind of thing. They would come to call it 'One Great Hour of Sharon.'

It wouldn't be a loan. They didn't want any more debt added to Sharon's load. They saw Sharon.

They poured that money out because Sharon was their sister and she was of value. Her life was of value. She was loved. That day they decided that \$10,000 for a couple of years of her life was a bargain.

The next day, Sharon walked out of jail, a free woman. Debt forgiven.

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To Sharon, that \$10,000 might as well have been a hundred million. It was a huge amount. A mind-blowing amount.

It was the first time in her life that anyone had really valued her in a concrete way.

And Sharon got it.

It changed her life. She was loved. She was valued.

It changed the way she saw herself. She was like a butterfly coming out of a cocoon.

She dressed better -- even though all her clothes came from thrift stores.

She spoke up for herself at work, and was given the training and a promotion.

She understood grace at a deeper level than ever before. She forgave herself.

You see, what happened was that we saw Sharon for the beloved child of God she was.

And Sharon saw us, as people who could be trusted with her darkest secret, and her deepest self, and because of that . . . see her more fully.

What we all saw was God's hand in the moment and in one another, God's opportunity to be real with each other, to be more fully our best selves. We are all human beings who are broken, but it is through that very brokenness Christ's light can shine for all the world.

And make no mistake, we were all changed, all bathed in grace, all forgiven.

I think it is almost impossible for us to comprehend a God who forgives without merit, who loves us anyway, who keeps inviting us home to the table and the fullness of life that only God can give.

We have a chance to risk great love, to see one another and to see our neighbors instead of standing in judgment.

When the apple turns bitter in our mouths and sets our teeth on edge, when separation from our best selves and from one another threatens community, we can find solace and healing in the sweet fruits of forgiveness and know the comfort of the great love to which we are all invited.

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