

NOT WHAT, NIT WIT

Sermon, June 24, 2018

Text: Luke 7:36-8:3

Most of us may be accustomed to thinking of Jesus traveling about the Galilean countryside with His twelve male disciples, but Luke 8 tells us there were a number of women in His entourage, as well. These are women, we are told, who had been cured, set free, *liberated* from crippling diseases and crippling spirits by Jesus' ministry; these first century women were liberated women long before the term "liberated women" became fashionable in the latter half of the 20th century. In the case of Mary Magdalene (*or, probably more accurately known as Mary of Magdala, as we learned in the Holy Land last February*), we are told Jesus liberated her from seven demons ... no one knows for sure exactly what that all entailed, and neither does anyone know for sure whether she was the woman featured earlier in our reading from Luke 7, but from the context some do believe that this woman who crashed the Pharisee's dinner party was this same Mary. The second woman listed in chapter 8 is Joanna, described as *"the wife of Cuza, the manager of Herod's household."* (*Herod was the son of Herod the Great; his rule extended over Galilee and he made Tiberias his royal capital ... Magdala and Tiberias are both on the northwestern shore and are just a mile or two apart*);¹ so Joanna evidently held significant social and political standing. Apparently Joanna had also been healed, set free, by Jesus, and now traveled with this company of women supporting His ministry. Note the extremes: Mary with the dark past, and Joanna the lady of the court, both in the same company ... tied together by the loving bonds of gratitude to Jesus Christ. There was also Susanna and "many others." Luke tells us *"these women were helping to support them out of their own means."* These women supported the ministry of Jesus out of their own means largely because they were so *grateful* for what He had done for them.

Our reading began with Jesus at the home of a Pharisee whose name is Simon. As a Pharisee, Simon was known as a good man with a good name in the community. We aren't told why Simon had Jesus to his home for dinner. As mentioned in previous verses, one of the disparaging accusations made by the Pharisees against Jesus was that He was always eating with the sinners and publicans ... so, maybe Simon thought Jesus just wasn't getting any invitations to the right homes (*Jesus did get to go to a lot of dinners; it's always been one of the benefits of being clergy.*) As they are in the midst of this dinner, the most awkward thing happened. This woman who was known to have led a rather checkered life in town appeared seemingly out of nowhere. She came in, came up behind Jesus as He reclined at table, and stood there weeping. And as she wept, she let her tears fall on Jesus' feet. She then gently dried Jesus' feet with her hair, kissed them, and poured perfume on them. We really don't know much about this woman; all we are told is she was a "sinner." And apparently everyone knew that. What is significant, though, is that, unlike the Pharisee Simon, this woman is given no name ... again, as mentioned earlier, some scholars surmise it was Mary of Magdala, but her name is not mentioned in this text. She is not named here. It's as if she is identified only by what she has done wrong. She is only "The Sinner."

Simon seems particularly unimpressed by Jesus' reaction to all this. He mutters to himself, *"If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is. He would have known that she is a sinner."* In short, *"If he were a real prophet, he'd put that sinner in her place."* There's a bit of humorous irony in the text in that NOW we are given his name when Jesus addresses him by name. Simon's name carries a bit of a pun, as mentioned in the Time with the Children, for the literal meaning of Simon is "He has heard." So Jesus says, "Simon" (*almost as if to say, "I heard that."*) "Simon, I have something to tell you."

Jesus then tells a story. *"Once upon a time there were two people who both owed a creditor money. One owed 500 denarii, the other person owed 50. Neither had the money to pay him back, but in his mercy, the creditor cancelled both their debts. Now, who do you think loved the creditor the most?"* Simon says, *"I suppose it was the one who had the most forgiven."* Jesus answers, *"Right!"* Then Jesus looks over at the woman and says, *"Simon, do you see this woman?"* And the careful reader almost has to say, *"No! Simon doesn't see the woman. Simon only sees the sinner. Jesus sees the woman."* Yes, Jesus sees the woman. He sees the person. He sees the unique individual created in the image of a good and noble God. Simon, however, can only see the sinner. He doesn't see the **Who**, he sees the **What**.

Again, the alliterative sermon title is a bit of a stretch, but the careful and compassionate reader should be wanting to tell Simon, *"She's not a what, nit wit, she's a who, a person, a living soul."* A nitwit is defined in Merriam's dictionary as *"a scatterbrained or stupid person."* The etymology isn't certain, but it's believed the "Nit" comes from either the German "nichts" (*which means "nothing"*) or the Yiddish "nisch" (*which means "no"*) ... combined with "wit", it means the person has nothing in the "wit" department, no intelligence at all. Some dictionaries give the alternative etymology that "nit" is the egg of a louse, something that is very, very tiny; so in this sense a nitwit is a small minded person. I like that. Only a small minded nitwit has the tendency to see the "whats" instead of the "whos" when it comes to people ... e.g., *"that's the racist, the sexist, the crook, the geek, the right or left winger, the tramp,*

¹ See <https://www.drivethruhistory.com/galilee-at-the-time-of-jesus>

the sinner." I'm sure this woman, like any one of us, longs to be seen for WHO she really is, not just by WHAT she may have done wrong. Like any one of us, she longs to be seen as a *person*, a person made in the image of a noble and good God, a person who, for whatever reasons, had fallen into difficulties and/or failures. Like any one of us, she longs to be seen with compassion and understood ... after all, no one knows the difficulties she may have endured, no one knows how they may have responded and/or reacted if faced with the same circumstances she had faced in her life, and no one knows how far she may have come or how much she has improved in spite of the hand she may have been dealt. Jesus is no nitwit; unlike Simon, He sees the Who, He sees the person, He sees the woman.

We can surmise this woman has apparently encountered Jesus before; again, some even think she was Mary Magdalene ... whoever she is, it seems she has heard His gracious words earlier. More than likely she had taken His gracious words to heart. Perhaps she experienced the transforming wonder of forgiveness and grace, and in that gracious forgiveness there emerged in her a feeling of self-worth that had been crusted over by self-hatred for much too long. So, when she heard Jesus was coming to Simon's house, well, she just has to find a way to honor this man who gave her such grace ... so she comes and crashes the dinner party. And unlike the religious host of the party ... who, as Jesus points out, didn't even give Jesus the common courtesies of hospitality ... this woman treats Jesus as He should be treated, and then some!

No, nitwit Simon doesn't see the woman. He can only see the sinner. He doesn't see what Jesus sees. Simon apparently has a hard time seeing grace at work. Now, he may be very good at tolerating and/or understanding the shortcomings in his own life ... who among us isn't? But when it comes to this woman, he only sees failure. A sinner. Sometimes we, too, have a hard time seeing grace at work, sometimes we, too, don't see what Jesus sees. Sometimes we, too, are good at seeing the sinners out there; we're not so good at seeing the sinner in here, in our own heart. Like the Pharisee Simon, we've become adept at seeing the sin and faults and the shortcomings in others, but are good at excusing and/or tolerating the sin and faults and shortcomings in us.

And like Simon, we still have names. Good names. When people greet you in Fellowship Hall after worship this morning, the chances are pretty good no one will say, "Hello, sinner!" No, they're probably going to say, "Why, hello Simon! Good to see you, Simon. You look good today, Simon." And that, of course, *is* what we want in this church ... it is *good* to look good, it is good to maintain good reputations and good names, and it is good to know each other by good names ... unless, however, it keep us from seeing the truth. That we are all also, well, sinners. There's a Pharisee and a sinner in all of us. Jesus did not tell Simon that story about who was forgiven the most loving the most in order to say that you have to become a really big sinner in order to find forgiveness. That is a really twisted understanding of that story. No, Jesus told that story to say, "You, too, Simon, have a really big debt." The difference between the Pharisee and the woman is not that she was a greater sinner; maybe she wasn't. The difference is that the woman knows she's a sinner, and she knows the joy of forgiveness! And that's why she's at the feet of Jesus, treating Him with the love, respect, honor and worship He deserves.

You've known me long enough to know that I don't stand here each Sunday hollering about sinners and sin. There have been some over the years who would have liked me to do more of that; Simon certainly would like me to do more of that, but there's no good news in that. Of course, there are times I need to underscore what is good and what is not good, what God calls right and the best and what God calls sinful and less than His best. But for the most part, I think each of us knows what we have done or have left undone. We know the failures we carry with us every day, the chances we've squandered, the people we've hurt, and the painful inconsistencies in our own lives. Again, in all of us there is a Pharisee trying so hard to be respectable and a sinner who keeps failing. None of us are all bad and certainly none of us are all good. But the message of the gospel is that God doesn't just love your good side; God loves you ... all of you, the sinner as well as the Pharisee within you. But we are never going to discover that love until we recognize and acknowledge the extent of our sin and receive His forgiveness. According to Jesus, those who have been forgiven much, love much. People who genuinely discover forgiveness experience so much love from God that the love overflows from them; it is love borne out of deep and heart-felt gratitude. They are no longer wasting time and energy trying to categorize and criticize and condemn all the sinners out there. They've been freed from that, and now they just have enormous amounts of love which energizes and enables them to do the most creative things.

Back to these liberated women mentioned by Luke in chapter 8, these who followed and supported Jesus ... they did so out of an enormous sense of gratitude. They were not just groupies, crowding in to be near Jesus Christ Superstar. These women were in Christ's *debt*. They had suffered physically and emotionally before they met Jesus, and He had set them free. Now here they were, supporting His ministry by their own means, because they wanted to help Him set others free. And that is, of course, why we are all in this sanctuary this morning, women and men, young and not-so-young. Christ has done something wonderful in our lives, as well ... and tied together by the loving bonds of gratitude to Jesus Christ, we gather to give our love and support so that He can continue to set others free.