

Sermons at Saint Mark's

The Reverend David Mesenbring

The Third Sunday after Pentecost, June 13, 2010

2 Samuel 11:26-12:10, 13-15; Galations 2: 15-21; Luke 7:36-8:3

Sins Unseen

That woman who was kissing Jesus' feet: what kind of sinner do you think she was? My assumptions were challenged this week by Sr. Barbara Reid OP, a Professor of New Testament at Chicago Theological Union. She writes¹ that there is no evidence the woman's sins were sexual in nature. The Pharisee, Simon, and his dinner guests could have considered her a sinner simply for practicing a trade (like midwifery) that involved entering Gentile homes.

Simon was trying to smoke out Jesus. As the rising young prophet began critiquing the elite status of Pharisees, Simon sought to test Jesus' authenticity. In contrast to the harsh judgment of her society, the woman became overwhelmed by God's unconditional love. Simon smugly presumes that were Jesus a prophet, he'd know he shouldn't let this sinner touch his feet.

Barbara Reid says the text hinges on Jesus' question to Simon, "Do you see this woman?" Really seeing implies the understanding that Jesus' acceptance leads to genuine devotion. Jesus puts Simon to shame with an unflattering comparison of her hospitality to his.

All of which is to make the point that we don't know what we don't know! Being too sure of himself got Simon in trouble. Likewise, Professor Reid argues we're naïve about how gender biases have shaped the scriptural texts as well as our interpretations of them. We don't know what we don't know.

Designating today as 'Jubilee Sunday' at Saint Mark's grew out of a group that recently studied Mike Scott's anthology, Money and Faith. Walter Brueggemann says "Jubilee justice entails finding out what belongs to whom and giving it back." Those who studied the book developed a profound sense of how we've

robbed "the other" of culture, heritage, and even identity, including our own children! For them, Jesus' question, "Do you see this woman?" can be addressed to how we 'see' the world's poor. Do we really see them or, 'not know what we don't know?'

That was sure true for King David when he admitted the prophet, Nathan, into his court. David naively thought he was hearing about an injustice among his subjects when Nathan spoke of a rich man with ample livestock who stole the only lamb of his poor neighbor to feed a passing wayfarer. David's anger was "greatly kindled," until Nathan revealed what he was really talking about: David's 'theft' of Bathsheba, including an arrangement to have her husband, Uriah, killed. As costly as that message was to David's conscience, he accepts it, instead of taking the easier route of attacking the messenger.

Naim Ateek is a Palestinian priest and prophet who says, "The true greatness of any person is when they meet truth and can change." He should know. The world regards our nation as the blind sponsors of ethnic cleansing among his people. When he offers us the opportunity to 'see' his marginalized people, we're more inclined to attack the messenger than accept the message.

Confronted by Nathan's judgment, David faced with integrity the fact that sinful ways have ugly consequences. While those consequences can be denied for a while, they eventually catch up to us. Consider, for example, our protracted denial of the price we pay to live a lifestyle addicted to oil? (*pause*) I understand the annual New Orleans Seafood Festival is a little more subdued this year, and bereft of some usual cuisine.

We don't know what we don't know about how poorly we see the subjects of our power: those subject to how power is organized in our favor. We just don't see them. Take me, for example. In preparing to preach on this Jubilee Sunday, I worried I wouldn't have new material to share since I've previously described the problem of odious debt.ⁱⁱ Many of us lobbied for, and later celebrated, limited debt relief that has been granted to some governments. But I had no idea how some greed has mitigated this progress. At www.JubileeUSA.org I was shocked to learn about "Vulture Funds" that speculated on the bad debt of some governments, buying it cheap and holding it while other debt forgiveness is negotiated. These funds then use creditor-friendly courts in New York, London and Paris to sue for these newly freed resources. I was shocked, not so much by what I learned as by what I hadn't known about how a system that favors me, exploits the poor.

We don't know, do we, how Simon responded to Jesus? He disappears and we're left wondering whether he faced the truth with which Jesus shamed him by turning against Jesus, or by becoming one of the Pharisees who supported him. At the end of today's gospel, we read that some women travelled with the disciples and "provided for them out of their resources." Some privileged people supported Jesus even though his message favored the poor. They joined the household of God, just like we prayed for the faith to do in our collect this morning.

The Greek word *oikos* means "welfare of the household." From it, we derive the words 'economy', 'ecology' and 'ecumenical'. My favorite ecumenical organization is Oikocreditⁱⁱⁱ, a thirty-five year old global cooperative of churches offering investors like you and me the opportunity to share micro-loans with people in seventy poor countries. Oikocredit is one of the oldest, largest and best providers of microfinance, a development strategy that is very hot in this town *especially* among young people who think churches are largely irrelevant to what really matters.

You and I are sitting on the best tool for evangelism we could ever want and the reason we don't know about it is that we don't control it. 94% of the investment capital comes from Europe and Oikocredit's global board of

directors is weighted in favor of people from borrowing countries. Need – not capital – drives its governance and policy.

Jesus asked a privileged Pharisee named Simon, "Do you see this woman?" The whole thread of Luke and Acts is about how Jesus wants to restore sinners like you and me to a life in community. It's not about who's a sinner and who's self-righteous. It's about common access to God's saving grace. That's why the woman with the alabaster jar was so happy: Jesus accepted her and he beckons us, too.

Can the poor of Nicaragua teach us to see? Later this Fall, we'll send a group there from this Cathedral who'll go to learn what we don't know: how they live. No service projects.

Awaken to God's saving grace in the meal we're about to celebrate here. Notice how it's made more graceful for the way in which we celebrate it here relatively inclusively. Aren't you glad we're not fighting about homophobia in this congregation? Imagine how much happier still we'll be when we can feed around a table full of people who look more like most of God's children than those of us with safe water to drink and shoes on our feet!

Pray with me....

Holy One, give us the grace to see all your beloved creatures, and like Simon the Pharisee be made aware of our privilege and power. May we, like King David, find courage to face the reality of our sins, and be changed by such truth. Increase our faith that the household of your Church – so full of this world's poor - will be a saving grace to us who are its rich. Amen.

ⁱ "Do You See This Woman? A Liberative Look at Luke 7:36-50" www.domcentral.org/preach/reidlk07.htm

ⁱⁱ In Congo, for example, after the CIA plotted to assassinate a democratically elected president, our banks negotiated huge loans with a corrupt successor, even when we knew that much of these funds were being squirreled away in private Swiss bank accounts. Today, as a result of this 'odious debt,' some African governments face debt service costs that exceed their combined national health care and education budgets.

ⁱⁱⁱ www.oikocreditUSA.org