

Your sin is forgiven (24Feb19)
Luke 7:36-50

This poor story.

It suffers bad imagination. Throughout history this woman gets made into a repentant prostitute.

Notice the only description (if it can be called that) is that she's a sinner. It is plain old disgusting voyeuristic sexism to say that if this woman is a known sinner, she must be a prostitute. Most images of her make her into a temptress for men to gawk at.

We don't know her sin. It could be that she was embezzling from her business. It could be that she had decided to go out with friends instead of making dinner and picking up her kids from piano lessons and taking them to basketball practice and chairing their cookie sales. It could be that she was an 80-year-old looking back at her life and just not feeling very faithful or close to God. We don't know her sin.

But we do know it's easy to get labeled as a sinner, portrayed as somebody who is lacking, who doesn't have it all together, as somebody who is doing something wrong or even *being* something wrong.

It may even be that this woman gets identified by the men at that ancient dinner and still too often by our chauvinistic culture now as a sinner even without being guilty, being labeled as a perpetrator even while being a victim. Maybe there is a sexual element in this, but it could be that this woman was pressured into it, was not a willing participant, had suffered doubly, in abuse and then from the perceptions of her, maybe even in herself.

We know that women and girls (and also vulnerable males) wind up in situations where afterward they're told it's their fault, that they asked for it, that they should put up with it, that it's because of how they dressed or looked or reacted. Or just for being weaker. We may not call such person a sinner, but instead name her a slut or a floozie. Or we categorize her as a welfare queen, with a different set of imagined presumptions and prejudices. However it is, she becomes a woman of ill-repute, with a burden of shame, suffering a reputation—with or without cause, still suffering either way.

But Jesus won't perpetuate those labels. Whoever this woman was, whatever she had done, however she had been treated, whatever had happened to her, Jesus won't see her through the confining, restricted vision.

Even referring to the woman as a sinner at the end of the story means we are the ones in bondage to sin, who won't let those bonds be released, who refuse the word of freedom and restoration of relationship. What's more, if we simply presume this woman was alluring and sexually provocative, we're like those Pharisees, still captive to our chauvinistic culture. Those religious insiders were failing to see a place for hurt and to welcome somebody who needed love and a fresh start. In not receiving people with needed care, we also make church an unsafe place, obstructing the way instead of clearing a path, precisely perpetuating the wrong, with a detriment for ourselves that means we won't receive the love or find the wholeness we also need to be part of. "Do you see this woman?" is also a question for us.

To reiterate, the story said the woman was known in town as a sinner, but it doesn't say what her sin was.

Again I say it's likely as not that it matched your sin. In the workplace or family or doubting faithfulness sorts. In the lurid details you imagine of her or live through yourself. In things you count as big regrets that make you lose sleep or the ongoing pile of mistakes. We've recognized

it could be the things that aren't your fault at all but are shames dealt that someone else placed on you.

Or another variety is what you're not willing to name as faults, seeing yourself pristinely while looking down your nose at others and casting wild aspersions. In these ways, you can find yourself in this story. You are the blameful shortsighted Pharisee, sure. You are also the woman, encumbered by sin, longing to be set free. What that is for you matters.

See, we notice church isn't about our blanket presumptions, but is always the localized, direct particularities, for you. It can be true and important to proclaim that God loves everyone. Maybe for the Pharisee, that's necessary, in order not to be restricted to a version exclusive for pious insiders. But there are also times you very directly need the word for yourself, not that God loves all, but: God loves you.

It's well and good generally and generically to say we have a God of forgiveness. But that's like a lesson to be learned. You may need the gift, the grace, the word that comes to release. Not that sins are forgiven, but that Jesus forgives you. Not that captives are released, but that he sets you free. Not that debts are remitted, but that he has cancelled your negative balance. Not just that all are welcome, but that Jesus has restored your place. Yes, you. Not that salvation is for all the earth, but that Jesus has come to save you.

This faith has a balance of the broad categories and very direct specificity. The Gospel says Jesus comes as a light for all nations, that all flesh may know the salvation of God. But that takes on flesh in each of us, as each encounters the light through our own eyes.

When we gather here, we live this story all over again. So it isn't just an ancient example. It certainly isn't a history lesson about what Jesus did one day. This story is for now, for us, for you, taking on flesh here. We gather mostly as religious insiders, Pharisees, those comfortable enough even to call this home. And Jesus has the hard work of trying to get through to us, to help us see our obstructive shortsightedness and still forgive sin to enable us to love, to call forth an appropriate response.

Still, you may arrive as the woman, weeping in repentance or weeping in joy, full of emotional devotion at the proclamation that your sin—whatever it is or was or continues to be, or even if it was no sin at all but only the reputation rottenly assigned to you—is forgiven. You are restored from shame. Your identity is not in the wrong, but as a child of God and valued member of the community. Always and no matter what. Jesus is here again to proclaim release to you. To send you on your way, filled with love that can spread out to the community around you.

That's how this ends. Made well, the woman is told “go in peace.” That is to go with shalom, or wholeness, her proper full place in the community.* In Palestine's Arabic greetings, this salaam is a declaration from hello onward that things are right in the relationship. Here, finally at the end of the story, things are right, and the woman will be known rightly. That is how you are welcomed here, as beloved and right and part of this body. That is what God's salvation, Jesus' forgiveness, the Spirit filling you with love means, too, in yourself, with God, with others. You are set right. That is how you are sent from here. Go in peace. Salaam in all your relationships. Whole. Shalom.

* Jennifer English, “Which Woman? Reimagining the Woman Who Anoints Jesus,” *Currents in Theology and Mission*. 39:6, p437. <http://currentsjournal.org/index.php/currents/issue/viewFile/20/20>