

I Am Like You
Luke 7:36-50
Northminster Presbyterian Church
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It was bound to happen. When we decided to switch to the Narrative Lectionary last fall, to change the list Jessica and I use to decide what Bible passage to use for our sermons from the over 50-year-old Revised Common Lectionary (RCL) to the seven-year-old Narrative Lectionary, we knew we would be going from the Luke year in the RCL to the Luke year in the Narrative Lectionary. So you've already heard me preach on this text, last June in the sending service for the folks going to ASP. And so, eight months ago, we considered this odd scene in Luke's gospel — odd because while all of the gospels remember a time when a woman washed Jesus' feet, only Luke puts the story in Galilee and not in Holy Week. Last time we concentrated on the woman, on her tears and on her loving devotion. But today I'm convinced that she's not the person in this encounter who is supposed to get our attention. Today, I want us to consider Jesus' host at this meal, Simon, the Pharisee.

At first it seems odd that Jesus is in the home of a Pharisee, since they are already mad at Jesus for doing things they think make him a heretic — forgiving sins, healing on the Sabbath, doing nothing to shut down the rumors that he might be the Messiah. Why would a Pharisee invite Jesus to dinner? Curiosity, maybe — but perhaps, like many of us, Simon liked a good argument as much or more than the next guy and Jesus was likely to prove a lively debater. But then she shows up and Simon's plans get thrown out of the window. The moment he sees her, the moment he sees Jesus not rebuff her, something happens that hasn't happened yet in this gospel. We are told what Simon is thinking. Luke lets us hear Simon's thoughts, thoughts he is a polite enough host not to say out loud.

Simon knows this woman's story and it's not a good one. Our tradition likes to label her a fallen woman but I defy you to find that in the text. It just says her sin is known in town and she has a reputation. But in first century Galilee that could mean that she loans money and charges interest, or that she eats pork, or she doesn't make the annual pilgrimage to the temple in Jerusalem. Whatever it is, she's a sinner. And with a smile plastered across his face, Simon hides the sneer he's actually feeling about her and now about this so-called rabbi who lets her give him a first century pedicure and aromatherapy treatment while they are sitting at the dinner table.

We know how Simon feels, don't we? It's been a crazy year out there, hasn't it? So many people are doing things that we strain to understand, so many are adopting ideas that anger us or frighten us or disgust us. And it's all we can do to hide the sneer when we talk about them. It's all we can do to attend family gatherings or conferences or reunions without our heads exploding because THOSE people are just so wrong — if only they could see things, see the world the way that we do.

And Jesus turns to Simon, who hasn't said a word, and he says, "I have something to say to you." And then Jesus goes all law professor on Simon, telling the parable of the forgiven debts and asking Simon a question that only has one answer — the one who will be more grateful is the one who has had the greater debt forgiven — an answer that hoists Simon on the petard of that internal sneer. And suddenly this text is making me uncomfortable and maybe making you uncomfortable too. She is more grateful because she needs his message of forgiveness — of a

new start, a new life — more than Simon does. After all, does he really need a new life? He's doing just fine with the one he has, isn't he? He's not like her; he doesn't need Jesus like she does. Or doesn't he?

Seventeen years ago yesterday, audiences first experienced the interview play *The Laramie Project*, a work by the New York-based theatre group Tectonic Theatre. It's since been made into an HBO film, but it started as a series of over 200 interviews conducted by the actors in the company who travelled to Laramie, Wyoming a month after Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson pistol-whipped Matthew Shepherd, a young, gay college student, and left him in a coma with fatal injuries, tied to a fence on the prairie outside of Laramie. And the people of Laramie, so close to the event, are very quick to make those two men, and even Matthew, an "other." They are quick to condemn the two responsible for his death and to blame Matthew for being with them, or making a pass at them. They are quick to let Simon's sneer show very publicly. THEY, their town, is NOT "those people."

And then as the interviews progress and more is known, they have to deal with the reality that these two boys are a reflection of Laramie. They grew them; they taught them; they helped form them. And just as many find themselves able to begin to see that Matthew was one of their own, entitled to dignity and love and respect, just as Aaron and Russell were, in so many ways, two of their own.

Coincidentally, one year ago tomorrow, another Matthew Shepard project debuted. It was the choral oratorio, "Considering Matthew Shepard," a masterwork by choral conductor, composer and arranger Craig Hella Johnson, whose Grammy winning professional chorus Conspirare, debuted the work last February in Austin. In putting the work together, Johnson gathered the words of many, like the folks at Tectonic theatre, to create an operatic and yet intimate evening of choral songs. The most searing movement of the piece, for me, is a section that is directed to Aaron and Russell, the two men who languish in jail for Shepard's murder. It is called "I am like you."

"Some things we love get lost along the way,
That's just like me, get lost along the way—
I am like you, I get confused and I'm afraid
and I've been reckless, I've been restless, bored, unthinking, listless, intoxicated,
I've come unhinged,
and made mistakes
and hurt people very much.

I am like you.
(this troubles me).
I am like you
(just needed to say this).
Some things we love get lost along the way."¹

¹ <http://conspirare.org/project/considering-matthew-shepard/>. The suggested reference to *Considering Matthew Shepard* came from the Well Paper of Rev. Meg Peery McLaughlin on this text, presented in the spring of 2016 in Birmingham, Alabama.

These memory pieces, in word and song, remind us that so often, when we find ourselves in Simon mode, our sneers about others who we might not call sinners, but we will call bad people or stupid people or hateful people, so often in those moments, Jesus turns back to us and says, "Michael, I have something to say to you." And we want to say, "But Jesus," just as Simon wanted to say, I'm sure, "I follow the law; I go to church; I'm kind to my spouse and children; I don't cheat on my taxes; I give to the poor; I'm one of the good guys and gals." And maybe we are, but the moment we start saying that mysterious "they" —are worse than we are — though we might not use that word sinner, the moment we do that, we fall into Simon's trap that says, "I don't need Jesus; I don't need grace."

Never mind the economic or racial or educational or ethnic or gender or cisgender or heteronormative privilege I enjoy that I had nothing to do with creating, but which I enjoy greatly. Never mind that I have the ability to not live mindfully, blissfully unaware of whether the women and men — who made my clothes, raised my food, built my car or smartphone or condo — were not paid a living wage. Never mind the countless acts of oppression or exploitation done in my name by the companies that make up my 401K's mutual funds.

Hear me clearly, I'm not remotely suggesting that Jesus is trying to make Simon feel guilty, or that I'm trying to make us feel guilty, or to beat ourselves up because we benefit from countless injustices that we have little or no power to change. This story, this encounter isn't about making Simon into a bad person. It's instead an invitation to heed the words of the poet lyricist to Aaron and Russell, to hear the blessing that Jesus sees in this unnamed sister sinner. I am just like you, and if that's true, then all of us are in need of grace. None is more worthy of God's love, of the gracing, life renewing actions of Jesus than anyone else. And that's not a reason to be sad; that, my friends is a reason to rejoice.

The woman knows what it's like to not be defined by her past, whatever it was — that she is instead defined by the new beginning she is given. When was the last time you set down your "supposed to's?" Even if just for a moment — the countless ways we "should" ourselves, the demands of others and those we impose on ourselves and carry around like a backpack full of rocks — doubts or anxiety about whether you are being the parent, the spouse, the employee, the employer, the friend, the Christian, the citizen you believe you ought to be?

We live in a time where I worry our two most common states of being are a distancing disgust at others and a niggling sense that while we may not be as wrong as others, we can never be enough. Today Jesus wants to remind us that he came for that woman and for Simon and for Aaron and Russell and Matthew; that his gracing love is good news for all, and specifically for you and for me, too; that the promises that are reflected by the waters in that font — the renewing, cleansing grace of Jesus' sacrificial love — mean that none of us is defined by our worst moment, and none of us is limited because of the heights we may never achieve; that we are all invited to live as those who are freed, freed to love those in this community, yes, but also freed to love even the people that we may still think are wrong, and so inviting us into a different kind of relationship even with those whose actions and opinions we oppose. We are freed to love because we have been loved by a God who says there is nothing you can do that can take you beyond the reach of my renewing grace, freed to love as this woman loved, offering ourselves in gratitude, in humility, and joy. And somewhere along the way, we too will discover that this freedom to love, this confidence in loving, is the faith that saves the world — even us.