

“I Know It When I See It”
A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church
Luke 7:36-50
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Seventh Sunday after Epiphany

Simon the Pharisee does what we typically do when we want to get to know someone better: he invites this Jesus guy to a meal. He wanted to get closer. He wanted to figure out who this man was that the crowds said was a prophet and a healer and who some said was the Messiah. He wanted to know more. He didn't have a scorecard that would help him determine whether Jesus was a fraud, or a prophet, or the one about whom much had been prophesied. Simon didn't know how Messiah-ship is manifested on earth, but, he figured he'd know when he saw it.

Jesus arrives at Simon's house, and there are others there, and Jesus takes his place at the table. But soon there is an uninvited guest. This woman - a known sinner - got a hot tip that Jesus would be at Simon's house that night. She had to meet him. She had to do something. Something about him compelled her to go there with her alabaster jar of ointment. What it was, she couldn't precisely put her finger on. Was it hope? Was it peace? Was it an answer? She didn't know what she was looking for from him. She wasn't sure what about him made her want to wash his feet. She couldn't give you the Aramaic word for what she needed. But she would know it when she saw it.

Simon has a great poker face. At least in Luke, he does. When this story is told in the other gospels, someone always speaks up. In Mark, those watching object in anger out loud¹. In Matthew, it's the disciples who object². And in John, we get Judas griping³. But not here.

Here Simon has an internal monologue.

He sees this sinner putting on quite the show. She has brazenly and scandalously let down her hair. She is weeping like a child. She's washing his feet. She knows what she's doing. She's behaving indecently. She knew whose house she was entering. She knew how inappropriate all of this would be. She knew she was breaking a dozen taboos. Oh, she knew! Nevertheless, she persisted.

Simon could find scores of scriptural citations to describe this indecent woman's behavior as out-of-bounds and even obscene. But he doesn't need the scrolls to tell him when a sinful person was acting in an unholy way. He knows it when he sees it.

Jesus feels her tears on his ankles. He feels her hair touch his toes. He feels her lips kiss his feet. He feels the luscious ointment upon his skin. She is behind him. But he doesn't need to look into her eyes or

¹ Mark 14:4

² Matthew 26:28

³ John 12:4-5

to demand from her an explanation for her lavish unexpected hospitality. It is given from deep in her soul. It is adoration mixed with vulnerability. It is love. He knows it when he sees it.

Simon's eyes scan from the scandalous woman to his dinner guest. Messiah? Absurd. Prophet? Ha! Simon says to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him—that she is a sinner." But this man knows nothing. He doesn't know who she is. And he doesn't know that this kind of sensuality is ungodly. He cannot be sent from God. He is merely a man. Simon can tell this man brings not a word from the heavens, but a message incompatible with a faithful life. He needs no further evidence of Jesus's unworthiness. He knows it when he sees it.

When Jesus was an infant, he had caused a stir in the temple when his parents took him there to present him to God. This woman, Anna, a prophet, had talked about Jesus being the redemption that Israel sought. And a man named Simeon prophesied, saying to Mary, "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed *so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed*—and a sword will pierce your own soul too."⁴ Inner thoughts are revealed at Simon the Pharisee's house. He speaks only to himself his thoughts about the woman and about Jesus. But then Jesus speaks: "Simon, I have something to say to you."

I imagine Simon is caught a bit off-guard. "This man seems to read my mind!" Jesus has caught him judging. Jesus has caught him withholding love and hospitality. Jesus has caught him not seeing the woman as a beloved child of God. *Simon* is the one who does know who is at the table. This lack of love and faith and curiosity and care is the cause of the redemption that the world needs. It is a fear of bodies and sensuality. It is an inability to comprehend what God might be doing. It is an inability to see love. It is an inability to see holiness. It is a broken world unable to confess its brokenness, and Jesus knows it when he sees it.

"Do you see this woman?" says Jesus. She can feel his eyes on her. She can hear his voice, rich and full of warmth. She has no words to describe the way her soul is being lifted. She can't explain it, but she can feel forgiveness wash over her. She feels grace envelop her, even before he speaks directly to her. These are things she'd been told were unavailable to her. She did not expect to find them here, but she somehow knew she would. She feared she wouldn't be able to recognize grace. But it turns out she knew it when she saw it.

The others at the table know heresy when they see it. They know arrogance. They hear Jesus declare forgiveness - "Your sins are forgiven" he'd said! They are at once appalled and intrigued. Who is this man who dares to say these things?

Jesus hears their inner thoughts, but continues to look at the woman. He hears their closed hearts and he sees hers, burst open. She has poured out love in abundance. She has received forgiveness with humility. She has not let these powerful men keep her from seeking redemption. She has swallowed her pride and made her fear says its prayers and she has made no plea, but only shown deep love. She has thrown herself at the mercy of the Lord. All of her actions, done in silence, show Jesus two deeply confounding

⁴ Luke 2:34-35

theological concepts demonstrated with the clarity of simple truth. He knows what he sees in her. He sees faith. And he sees salvation.

This little dinner scene plays out for us daily. As we move through school and work and grocery stores and church and our own homes, the internal monologue of Simon the Pharisee haunts us. Only we can see what is really going on. Everyone else is misguided. If they only knew! If they only knew how they looked doing that. If they only knew how silly they sound. If they only knew what a terrible driver they are! If she only knew how those clothes made her look. If they only knew how wrong they are about politics. If they only knew how tacky they are. If they only knew what the rest of us think about them. If they only knew. Boy, I sure am glad I'm in the know.

These monologues are part of being human, of course. Speaking them aloud would be rude. But their remaining unchecked in our heads is problematic, as Simon discovered. When his monologue becomes a dialogue — “Simon, I have something to say to you.” — everything changes. Monologues are for the theater and for late night talk show hosts. More and more they are seeping their way into politics and the way we consume news. More and more we like the narrative we run through our own heads, and we’re not interested in having a dialogue. If we don’t hear Jesus interrupting our monologue and saying “I have something to say to you,” we have failed to recognize with whom we are sitting, and at whose table.

This little dinner scene plays out daily. We are faced with options about how to show up to meet our God. We can be calculating. And stingy with hospitality. We can see how things go before we decide how to behave.

Or we can follow this unnamed prophet-sinner woman in showing up with abundant love and adoration. We can let our hair down. We can express our love for God and one another with reckless abandon, with our whole bodies, no matter whose house we’re in, no matter what the onlookers say and think, no matter how ridiculous we might feel.

I believe that all of us have tinkered with this option at times. We have taken a deep breath and shared with someone the was we appreciate them, even if it felt awkward or uncomfortable. We have gone out of our way to show love when it wasn’t easy. We have apologized for hurting someone, though it bruised our pride to do so. We have gone beyond what is acceptable and proper in order to speak up for someone who has been silenced. We have risked vulnerability in order to do what is good and right and holy. We have used our clunky, fleshy, God-given bodies to stand up for hope.

And when we do these wild, brazen, audacious, and courageous acts of love, we find that this strange thing happens. We struggle to explain it. We experience grace and forgiveness and love. We show just a little dab of faith, and what we receive is salvation. The immensity of what happens to us when we approach life like the woman, and not Simon the Pharisee is indescribable. It has many names: peace, hope, truth, grace, love, forgiveness, assurance, salvation, resilience. Resurrection. But our language for such a miracle is limited. It is not linguistic. It is not logical. It cannot be adequately explained. It is holy, apart, other. Thanks be to God, we know it when we see it. Amen.