

The Rev. Joan M. Kilian

Trinity Episcopal Church

2 Samuel 11: 26 – 12:10, 13 - 15
Galatians 2: 15 – 21Psalm 32
Luke 7: 36 – 8:3

When you look at a painting, what do you look at first? I've been blessed to have been in some of the world's greatest art museums, and in each, it has been almost as interesting to observe the observers as it is to take in the paintings themselves. Sometimes, museums provide benches in the middle of a large gallery for those of us who like to sit back and let the totality of a painting wash over us – the spectrum of colors, the use of light and shadow, the medium of choice, the overall intensity, the emotions it evokes, the story it tells.

Others among us move in a little closer to focus on whatever characters are depicted. Are the people shown as contented or agitated? Are they noble or wicked? Are they old and wise or young and playful? What might they be thinking or saying? How do the characters relate to one another?

Still others of us look more closely for meaning and try to interpret a painting through the eyes of the artist. What is the artist trying to say about the world as they are experiencing it? Is the artist commenting or reflecting on particular political or social issues? Is there a message for us?

And then some of us, perhaps especially the artists among us, like to get really close up and analyze the artist's technique. Just exactly how does the artist use paint and brush to build up that overall effect of colors, of the play of light, of reality or abstraction, of negative space, of depth?

English bishop and Bible scholar, N. T. Wright, invites us to look at today's Gospel passage as one of Luke's many great 'paintings.' We are to imagine this story depicted by Rembrandt or Caravaggio or some other artist, and then look at it from these different perspectives of totality, character, political issue and individual brush strokes. [Google "woman anointing Jesus, paintings"] As Wright notes, this story of Jesus, the nameless, sinful woman, Simon the Pharisee and all the others who are in the background, is as full of meaning as any other story in the New Testament, but in the hands of Luke the Storyteller, it also becomes a layered, multi-dimensional, vivid masterpiece.

Let's consider first the overall effect. The totality of the picture or story. This is one of the few stories that can be found in some version in all four gospels. While Luke's account has distinct similarities with the others, it is probably a description of a different event from that recorded in Matthew, Mark and John.

The three characters of Jesus, the woman and the Pharisee stand out from the backdrop of the dinner party. Wright notes that Jesus somehow keeps his balance between the outrageous display of adoration by the woman and the equally outrageous display of rudeness on the part of Simon, the host. Simon's lack of hospitality is nearly as egregious as the woman's public acts of intimacy with a man. The

balance comes in with Jesus' behavior which is just as outrageous as the other two characters'. There are broad brush strokes of power and passion that color the story in bright hues.

Despite the relative brevity of the story, there is depth to the portrayal of each of the three main figures, as we focus in more closely. Simon, the Pharisee, has invited Jesus to this dinner party, an activity with which Jesus is quite familiar. [Immediately prior in Luke – Jesus as glutton and drunkard, c. John the Baptist) That would lead us to believe that, unlike many of the other Pharisees, Simon is not initially opposed to Jesus. He remains open enough to invite him to dinner and discover more about him. Simon is not *as* rigid as some of his counterparts. He has apparently heard rumors to the effect that Jesus is some sort of prophet, and he wants to see for himself what this itinerant rabbi is all about.

After the woman enters the room, Simon thinks he has his answer regarding Jesus. In Jesus' culture, it is not unusual for homes to be open to the courtyard or street so that beggars can walk in for a small handout, or curious passers-by can stick their heads in and see what's going on. So as unusual as it might sound to us that this woman just walks in, for Simon and Jesus, it isn't particularly peculiar. At first.

Simon recognizes the woman and knows of her reputation as a sinner. Luke never explains exactly *why* she is sinful. As the head of the household, Simon expects the woman to come to *him* for a handout. But the woman doesn't – she heads straight to Jesus. Although family members might sit in chairs around a table for a family dinner, a dinner party is a different matter. Men recline on pillows, or low couches, around the table, resting on their left arm and reaching for the figs or bread or wine with their right hands. Feet are pointed away from the table for obvious reasons. This enables the woman to walk straight up to Jesus' feet. Instead of asking for something, she has come to give something. She pulls out an alabaster jar of ointment from the folds of her robe. She comes prepared for a premeditated act of love. She is suddenly overcome with her emotions as she reaches Jesus. So much so that she starts to weep profusely. She kneels down and without heed to propriety, she lets her hair loose to fall where it will, and she begins to use it to dry her tears from his feet. She interrupts her wiping with kissing, and then rubs the ointment into his feet.

It is an incredibly sensual moment, and she seems not to notice or even care that others are watching in stupefied shock. There is nothing polite or controlled about the woman's actions. All that matters is her gratitude. This woman's love is not the ground of a pardon that she comes seeking, but rather the proof of the forgiveness she has already received. She isn't forgiven for the largesse of her love, as if she has somehow earned it. Instead, her outpouring of love is in response to having been forgiven. She is aware of how very much she has been in need of this forgiveness.

Simon, watching her and knowing something of her, is embarrassed and outraged. 'Obviously Jesus is not the prophet he is reported to be,' Simon thinks to himself, 'or he would know that this woman is sinful and he would not allow this behavior to continue.' Simon is immediately proved wrong on both counts.

Jesus apparently is privy to Simon's thoughts and he offers him a riddle in the form of a parable. At this kind of dinner party, the usual entertainment is witty banter, proverbs and riddles. Simon invites Jesus to proceed. Clarence Jordan, the found of the Koinonia Community over near Americus, likened a parable to a Trojan horse. It is so alluring, he said, that it is allowed into the inner court. No one is aware of the danger it poses until it is too late. The armies it contains may not be large, but they catch people by surprise. That is one reason why parables are short, according to Jordan. The trap must be sprung before the listener realizes that any of his or her usual defenses are necessary.

Simon walks right into the trap of Jesus' parable. Jesus proves that he is a prophet by the Pharisee's own standards. The Pharisee thought Jesus would be a prophet if he knew who or what this woman was. Instead, Jesus shows that he not only knows who and what the woman is, but he also knows exactly who and what the Pharisee is. And then, to the Pharisee's consternation, Jesus proceeds to hold up the woman and her actions as an example of all that is good.

To look at this 'painting' through the eyes of the artist, Luke, is to show what God's love is really like and how it turns the values of this world upside down. God's Kingdom is a "first shall be last and the last shall be first" kind of place. In the words of author, Gail Godwin, "the most revolutionary part of Jesus' teaching is that a good inner disposition (i.e. the unnamed woman) is more important than following codes for correct external behavior (i.e. the Pharisee). Jesus upends normal expectations as he lets the Pharisee know that forgiveness and love are more important than how rigidly one follows all the rules. And of course, following the rules is what Pharisees do best.

To look closely at the brush strokes in this painting is to realize how Jesus turns the table on the Pharisee. *He* is the one who has erred by not showing proper hospitality, which is so very important in this Middle Eastern culture. The Pharisee doesn't see how much he himself is in need of God's forgiveness, so he is unable to appreciate the generosity of God's love. He has yet to grasp that being open to forgiveness by God frees one to love with radical, prodigal, abundant love, just as this woman has done. N. T. Wright says that for Luke, true faith is what happens when someone looks at Jesus and discovers God's forgiveness. The sign and the proof of that faith is the outward expression of love.

Step back again from this picture, this painting, and see it as a story of which each of us are a part. Whether it is the full sweep of the bigger picture, the characters it contains, the message it conveys or the delicate subtleties of Luke's writing, this story is a master portrayal of a glimpse of the Kingdom of God. Like the Pharisee, where in your life or in mine do we need God's unconditional, ever-ready forgiveness? Like the unnamed woman, where do we need to profess our gratitude in prodigal expressions of love? May we learn to live into the freedom that forgiveness brings, so that we might pour it out in love for God and for one another, and so become a living work of art in the Kingdom of God.

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