

BROADWAY CHRISTIAN CHURCH • COLUMBIA, MISSOURI
THE WORSHIP OF GOD • FEBRUARY 16, 2020 • EPIPHANY
WEEK OF COMPASSION SUNDAY

The Litany
Based on Psalm 119

You are righteous, O Lord, and your judgments are right.

We love your promises and do not forget your precepts.

Even though trouble and anguish come upon us, your presence is our delight.

Your decrees are righteous forever; give us understanding that we may live.

The Scripture
Luke 7:36-50

One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and took his place at the table. And a woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment. Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said 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." Jesus spoke up and said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." "Teacher," he replied, "Speak." "A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he canceled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?" Simon answered, "I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt." And Jesus said to him, "You have judged rightly." Then turning toward the woman, he said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little." Then he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?" And he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

The Message
Who Do You Need to See?
Mark Briley

Synopsis: Some questions of Jesus can be quite haunting. On the surface, the question raised in this passage seems a simple one: *"Do you see this woman?"* It's nothing more than an action statement designed to get Simon, a Pharisee who's hosting Jesus in his home, to turn his head and look at the woman who, with tears and determination, wipes the feet of Jesus. But, as Jesus is apt to do, his question runs much deeper than that. *"Do you see this woman"* is him asking, *"Do you see this person who has been dismissed by Rome and your theological doctrine as a nonentity? Do you see this woman, nameless to all the men, defined as sinner, rebellious, unclean, and of low moral wattage because men who idolize their gender have scandalized her humanity? Do you see this woman?"* Jesus forces us to look where we do not want to look. On this *Week of Compassion* focus Sunday, what else is Jesus calling us to see, truly see? In these deep looks, we see something more. Perhaps we even see ourselves.



Simon had a nice house. It was old-town Columbia in character. Some history to it but fashioned with above-average flair for the modern. An open-aired courtyard with a fountain and small garden centered the home and was often the scene for the action. Such was likely the case on the occasion Jesus was invited for dinner.

Simon was a Pharisee. Made a bit of a name for himself. Motives for hosting Jesus are open for debate. None of us have ever *seen* a motive anyway, right? We just have our suspicions. What does your gut tell you? The Pharisees were often seen as opposing Jesus' behavior and teachings, but that was generalized. There were some Pharisees open to Jesus and such could be the reason for Simon's invitation.

But the whole lack of customary courtesy – kiss of peace, pouring cold water on the feet, a blessing or anointing -- suggests Simon wasn't likely a sympathizer. Maybe, as we've seen from time to time, Simon could have set up a sting operation to trip Jesus up and expose him as a heretic... but probably not... he does call Jesus Rabbi with some sincerity. Maybe Simon loves rubbing shoulders with the famous --- a sort of collection of celebrities. Jesus was growing quite a following after all. Nothing like being at a Super Bowl party and name dropping – *"Hey, you've been following the Jesus movement? Just so happened Jesus was at my place last week."* Who's to know, but here we are in the courtyard, reclined at the table at Simon's place, Jesus present as conversation fodder and then... a nameless woman joins the party.

Who let *her* in? Good question. You are not likely use to random people allowing themselves into your home for a party are you? This wouldn't have been all that strange, however. It was custom that when a rabbi was at a meal in such a house that all kinds of people came in freely to listen to pearls of wisdom. It's not altogether strange, then, that this woman gets in. No bouncers at the door checking ID's. Even so, we all know that experience of the invite that says, "*Everyone's Welcome!*" when not *everyone* is welcome.

Nameless woman (*can I call her Grace?*) finds herself at the foot of Jesus, pouring out the only thing of value she owns – some ointment from an alabaster jar – and bathing his feet with her tears. She, Grace, has undoubtedly heard Jesus teach... likely pushed to the edges of the crowds but in earshot enough to hear a liberator speak life into her lifeless spirit.

Simon notices her, judges her reputation by looks or past engagement, and starts talking to himself. "*Self – are you seeing what I'm seeing? OMG. You've got to be kidding me.*" Maybe Simon's disgusted. Maybe he's more a voyeur who sees this as a great story to build up when he name drops Jesus next time – '*you'll never guess what I saw Jesus doing with this woman*'... maybe he's annoyed that she's taking his attention – after all he invited Jesus to hear him share all of his wacky ideas about God's kingdom being different than we thought. The kingdom is different than you and I think it is, too, don't you imagine? I mean, maybe Simon has a point – some people aren't worth the air space we give them, right? But then again – Jesus is probably right about more of this than we , and he seems to think the air space is theirs as much as mine. I certainly didn't earn it. Oh, it's that old Ragamuffin gospel stuff that Brennan Manning always wrote about – you know the Revelation 7:9 passage that talks about the multitudes of nations and languages and such standing before the throne of God?

Manning (not Peyton remember, but Brennan Manning) said, "*I see them there. I see the prostitute from the Kit-Kat Ranch in Carson City, Nevada, who tearfully told me that she could find no other employment to support her two-year-old son. I shall see the woman who had an abortion and is haunted by guilt and remorse but did the best she could faced with grueling alternatives; the businessman besieged with debt who sold his integrity in a series of desperate transactions; the insecure clergyman addicted to being liked, who never challenged his people from the pulpit and longed for unconditional love; the sexually abused teen molested by his father and now selling his body on the street, who, as he falls asleep each night after his last 'trick', whispers the name of the unknown God he learned about in Sunday school. 'But how?' we ask.*" My favorite answer is always, "*Because Jesus.*" Manning doesn't use those words but that's what he suggests. "*There they are,*" he writes. "*There *we* are - the multitude who so wanted to be faithful, who at times got defeated, soiled by life, and bested by*

*trials, wearing the bloodied garments of life's tribulations, but through it all clung to faith.”*¹

Grace clings to this faith as she lets her hair down (*another cultural no-no*) and wipes the alabaster oil and tears from Jesus dirty feet. As Simon's face tells the story of the musings of his mind, Jesus calls him on it. *“Hey, Simon! Why don't you take a picture it'll last longer?”* *“Ah, excuse me?”* *“Let me tell you a story.”* *“Shoot, Jesus.”*

As Jesus does so well, he starts in about these two guys who owe the bank money. One guy owed significantly more than the other but neither of them could pay. The bank forgives both debts in their entirety. *“Good deal?”* Jesus asks. Simon says, *“Yeah... especially for the guy who owed so much more than the other guy.”* Jesus says, *“You got it.”*

Compassion should be a verb. It should move us to feel what it is like to live inside somebody else's skin. Whenever Scripture tells us *“Jesus had compassion for them [whomever ‘them’ happened to be],”* it means he felt it from the gut. When we see people in need, there should be this guttural response of angst that such a need even exists. Because Jesus senses that Simon thinks this woman is of no value, sin-full and certainly much more of a sinner than he thinks *he* is, Jesus says, *“Look at this woman. Do you see her? Do you see Grace?”* Simon's surely defensive at this point if not stuck on the literal question: *“Of course I see her – she's right there all mixed up in your feet.”* *“But do you see her, Simon?”*

And here's the unspoken dialogue if you ask me. *“No, Simon. You don't see her. You think you see her, but you treat her as a nonentity. Her only name to you is sinner, used by men who have scandalized her humanity. You see her as an outsider and a drain on your time and resources.”* Crickets from Simon, so my unspoken dialogue goes. Jesus continues, *“She is impoverished, oppressed, and wounded, and yet she serves with all she has. Do you see her, Simon? She's not an outsider – she's one of us.”*²

Compassion, you see, is the recognition of our shared humanity – our shared child-of-God-ness and therefore nothing about compassion is a handout – it is a relationship between equals. We have our sin-debts just like anyone else. It's all forgiven, so why are we so reluctant to share it with others? Somebody has said *“Stewardship is the act of organizing your life so that God can spend you.”* How are you in position to use what you have, as equals with humanity, to honor the place of everyone?

¹ This Brennan Manning quote was adapted from *The Ragamuffin Gospel: Good News for the Bedraggled, Beat-Up, and Burnt Out* and can be found at https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/27405.Brennan_Manning

² This description is inspired, in part, by Otis Moss III who addressed this question of Jesus in the book, *“What did Jesus Ask?”* Time Inc Books. 2015. Pg. 170-172.

Simon surely never looked at Grace the same again. Or he did – so caught up in his own world that even Jesus' pointed visual didn't faze him.

What image of humanity fazes you these days? What breaks through your own pain and chaos and surface and connects with your soul asking, "*Do you see me?*" We've got to start seeing people – not issues, not labels, not insiders and outsiders – just people who Jesus has very clearly stated are worth the fuss. Do you see the widowed?

Did you know widows typically lose 75% of their friendships within a year of losing their spouse? Do you see the widow? Do you see the teenager in foster care who on his eighteenth birthday is moved from the youth shelter directly to the adult shelter? Can you imagine that?

I heard a woman named, Willie, share her story a few years back. She was a year out of prison at the time. She was building a new life, at that moment, just one test away from completing her GED with plans to go to college. She had one of her three children returned to her care, and she was trying to break a cycle in her family – a cycle that has her father incarcerated again for the seventh time. Do you see Willie? Who do you need to see today?

Parenting stuff hits me often as we walk through the many transition moments of having three kids a few years apart. I see you, parents. I was talking with a friend who has kids just a couple years older than my own. His daughter is maturing and he said so vulnerably to me, "*I don't know how to be her dad right now. She's blossoming into a young woman and I just don't know...*" He's such an amazing father, really, but you know how you wonder about these things. I look at my own daughter who is blossoming and think, "*Ok. I see you. I see the divine spark in you. I see your incredible strength.*" And I pray, "*God, help me grow as the dad she needs me to be.*"

Who do you need to see? Compassion says, "*We've got to get into that relationship [whatever one we need most to see]... into the places where it hurts or where it is misunderstood and be vulnerable.*" That's how we see.



There's a gesture you make with your two fingers you know... that universal symbol of pointing them at your own eyes and then pointing them at another as if to say, "*I've got my eyes on you.*" I think it was created as more of a threat than something positive, but my son and I like to do it to each other from time to time as that knowing – "*I see you! I*

gotcha you, son! I'm with you. I trust you. You can trust me."

Nick shared at our staff meeting this week that the Maasai tribe in Kenya shares a greeting and parting blessing whenever they come and go that simply translates, *"I see you."* Terry mentioned that experience that often comes after you say to someone: *"It's nice to see you,"* as that person responds, *"It's nice to be seen."* I wonder if as individuals and collectively as a church if we need to interact this way with the world. It can be overwhelming because the needs are great but if we don't see or acknowledge, then we cannot do much of anything.

Who is Jesus asking you to see? The co-worker whom you don't understand? What may you be missing? How can you see him or her? The person judged purely by their race, religion, sexual orientation, or some other label – is Jesus asking you to see them? Know them? Learn their story and see if it doesn't open your spirit in some important way. Whose image comes to mind when you hear Jesus ask, *"Do you see her?"*

I see Naomi Johanna – one of the 276 schoolgirls abducted in Nigeria by Boko Haram, whose name I drew on a Sunday morning in worship when the news first broke in 2016. All who wanted, took a name, so that no one would be just a number – but seen as human, beloved, named, lifted in daily prayers. We committed to pray for each one of those girls by name. Anyone willing took a name to say, *"I can't physical rescue these girls, but I can name one of them again and again as someone so important to our Creator and therefore to me."* I see you Naomi.



I see you, Laith Majid. Do you remember this dad?³ Can you imagine the decision he made for his family? His family fled the Islamic State in Deir Ezzor, a Syrian city in chaos by civil war violence since 2011. Their family loaded a flimsy inflatable raft built for four people but carrying 12 to escape the violence. The desperation had more than 51-million people, the highest number since World War II, fleeing their homes due to violence

around the world. That's more than six times the population of New York City, all emptied into terrible and unsanitary camp situations. Laith's family was among the

³ A number of articles can be found about the journey of this family. Here is one that helped supply details for this message: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/08/syrian-man-pictured-crying-as-his-family-landed-in-greece-finds-refuge-in-germany>

300,000 fleeing Syria, and the images seared in our brains are of the 2,500 dead people, many children, washing up on the shore in their attempts to escape. Fifty percent of the world's refugees are children. Do we see these children?

Laith's family endured years of bombardments from the Syrian government, rebel forces, and Isis. They took this chance as the best option for their family of six including his wife Neda, sons Mustafa, 18, Ahmed, 17, Taha, 9, and seven-year-old daughter, Nour. After more than two hours on the water with a boat well over its safe capacity, the boat lost air, water had leaked into it, and the refugees were soaked; physically and emotionally when they finally reached the shore. The photographer capturing the image said, "*In the moment of this picture [the emotion] all came together: the joy of having escaped; the love for their family; the grief over what continues to happen.*"

I'm getting more sensitive with age – my eyes were full when I saw this picture. I can't imagine Carrie and I having to make such a decision for our family. It makes your gut churn – the compassion of Christ surges, and you wonder "*What can I do? I see them but I feel so helpless.*"

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Week of Compassion has long offered a great way to think about this: *Stay, Pray, and Pay*. When we see needs, our inclination is to just go – get there – do something. But sometimes these sites can become inundated with well-meaning volunteers, who get in the way more than they help. Staying put is sometimes more helpful. If you need to 'do' something, consider pouring into a child in need in our own community. Second is pray. Pray without ceasing – for all affected, for the trained responders offering care and relief – for someone to welcome the stranger and give them nourishment. Pray for peace for the war torn and comfort where lives are lost. And finally, pay. Make a monetary gift – no gift too small. Your gift to *Week of Compassion* immediately fuels the organized work that's happening on the ground. *Week of Compassion* responds on our behalf every day to these needs around the world.

When we had a tornado in the Tulsa area, our church would hear immediately from Vy Nguyen, the Executive Director, saying, "*Anyone in your congregation need help?*" *Week of Compassion* remains active in Jefferson City, partnering with our Disciples churches there to rebuild home and hope in that community following last May's tornado. They do the same for those serving on the ground to help Laith and his family.



Vy was a child refugee himself, you know. In desperation, his mother put him on the back of a motorcycle as a child and told him to, "*Hold on tight.*" He never saw her again. When that motorcycle met the end of the road, Vy was loaded in a boat setting sail in the Pacific. Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, and the Philippines... then America – East Dallas Christian Church to be

precise, where he learned about help from *Week of Compassion*. And now here's Vy today, a Christian leader, directing *Week of Compassion*, helping us all be the hands and feet of Christ most effectively.

This is where the rubber of faith meets the road. This is Jesus looking at you and me and saying, "*Hey – I have a story to tell you and a question to ask you... do you see this person?*"



Here's another picture of Laith and his family. I'm a big sap. This one made me cry again. They ultimately made it to Germany where they were welcomed and started rebuilding their lives.

Friends, we can make a difference. We can see each other. We can see the needs in our backyards. We can pray for the tremendous needs of the world and we can give. Find that compassion in your gut. And I know it's not always the first thing we see. It may not be the first instinct of many of us. I laughed as a friend posted a meme on Face Book.

It says, "*What's a toxic trait you have?*" **Me:** "*I tend to eat the other person's fries on the way home, and I keep the one that is full.*" I laughed and then felt immediate shame: I've been guilty of that one before. But on this compassion Sunday, Jesus is calling us to press beyond the surface and really see one another. Who do you need to see? Take a deeper look... and with such heart, perhaps we may even come to see ourselves as God sees us.