

Problem: What do you see most of the time?

- In 2007, the Washington Post sponsored an experiment. They hired Joshua Bell, director of the famous Academy of St. Martin-in-the-Fields orchestra and one of the most recognized and talented violinists in the world to put on a baseball cap and play his 300 year old, \$3.5 million violin in a New York Subway. He played about 45 minutes of music from a Bach violin concerto (which he would play the next day in a sold-out concert hall) for subway goers on their morning commute. 6 people took the time to pause and listen to the artistry taking place. Bell raised a total of \$32. The Post wrote an award winning piece which asked the important question: In a commonplace environment, at an appropriate hour, do we see beauty? If we do not have a moment to see and hear one of the best musicians in the world, playing some of the finest music ever written, with one of the most beautiful instruments ever made . . . what other things don't we see as we rush through life?

-This question, I think, expands to us today with our scripture readings too. What kinds of things do we see and what kinds of things don't we see?

Solution: Jesus teaches us a new way of seeing.

-The idea of seeing is incredibly important in our gospel story of Jesus, Simon, and the woman. Seeing matters here. "Simon, do you see this woman?" Simon, of course, does see the woman, but in a different way. This woman, whoever she was, somehow got into the house where Jesus and the other guests were eating. She is labeled as "a sinner", for whatever reason, and seems to have a reputation. Simon knows who she is as soon as he sees her and there seems to be an awkward silence between Jesus, Simon, and even the guests as this woman is washing Jesus' feet. Simon's seeing seems to lead to judgement: "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."

-I can see myself in Simon's action of "seeing" and "knowing". How many of us have seen someone who annoys or frustrates us coming and roll our eyes in judgement. It's pretty common and probably especially common in our church too! What do we see and what do we think we know because of what we see?

-My cousin, Carl, inherited a desk that was in my grandfather's pastor office for years. It was a small, ratty thing that seemed to have all kinds of scratches and marks. Carl decided to refinish the piece himself and stripped it in his garage. To his surprise, he found that the wood underneath the old, oily varnish was that of rosewood. The grain pattern popped out at you like some grand symphony and the richness of the wood color was hard to match even for a master artist. "I couldn't believe it!" Carl said to me. "I was tempted to just use this desk in my garage for tools. Now, it seems it should take center stage in the middle of our house."

-This is getting at, I think, Jesus' point of seeing and forgiving the woman in Simon's house.

-As I was preparing for worship, I was looking up a bunch of children's sermons which were based on this story today and all of them did roughly the same thing. For example, one instructed the pastor to have "sin" written on a kleenex which was then to be crumpled up and put into a bag. The pastor was then supposed to construct this "magic" bag that has a secret pocket where they would hide the crumpled up "sin" kleenex in. In its place within the main part of the bag you had a fresh, uncrumpled kleenex which of course is supposed to represent you being forgiven (as Jesus forgave the woman of this story). This is what God now sees right? All of us nice and fresh!

-Except I don't think this is how forgiveness works, exactly. The desk that my cousin refinished still had scratches and dents on it. It had coloration issues where the sun had gotten through the varnish and affected the wood in some spots. It wasn't spotless by any stretch of the imagination, yet most of us would choose to look beyond these defects and see intense beauty of the piece. Most of us would chose to see the beauty instead of the defects. This is forgiveness, I think, in it's truest form.

-When Jesus forgave the sins of this woman, whatever they were, this woman didn't magically become pure and squeaky clean. The sin, defects, and imperfections still exist. But Jesus is saying, that doesn't matter. I see past those things. I see who you really are and love you for who you are.

-Forgiveness isn't about making us into someone we are not, but instead, it is the act of looking past the noisy subway station and grungy baseball cap and allowing the inner music and beauty to be free. This is what God does in the act of forgiveness and what we are also called to do as disciples. Forgiveness at the end of the day is a way of seeing differently.

Implication: As disciples, we are called to see differently and help others do the same.

-How can we as a church see differently? What does the act of forgiving mean for us?

-I had the privilege of going to the Montana Synod Assembly, the annual gathering of ELCA Lutherans from all over the state of Montana. At this assembly, we voted to do a number of things which move our church in Montana forward in a number of ways. One of the things that the assembly voted to do this year was to formally repudiate, as a collective in Montana, a doctrine of law which has been used in courts and legislatures for over 100 years: the Doctrine of Discovery. This, mostly unwritten tradition, has hugely influenced the way cases have been decided and laws have been written, especially in Montana. The Doctrine of Discovery sees land and resources as God-given, but through manifest destiny primarily to the white, Christian population who settled these lands only a couple hundred years ago. It grants privilege to take and use resources in whatever way this one group sees fit. This doctrine underlined the treatment, forced removal, and forced integration of Native Americans from their lands for generations and continues today to be used by United States courts in land disputes

and natural resource claims by multi-national companies. Along with the goal of issuing a formal apology to every tribe in Montana and a statement of repudiation of this doctrine, our Montana bishop sees the action of the Montana Synod in repudiating this harmful doctrine as the first step towards real forgiveness and relationship.

-There's a lot of scratches, blemishes, and distortion that we carry due to the actions of a lot of our grandparents and great grandparents on this issue. It's going to be a long and hard road in working for restoration, reconciliation, and ultimately (hopefully) forgiveness. But it's a road that I think we are called to take as disciples of Christ. It's a road that has been shown to us by Jesus Christ, especially in this story.

-Yes, it takes two parties in this case of repudiation to come to seeing each other differently. Another piece of paper is not going to change the way our church and the native tribes see each other overnight and it would be naive to think it would. But, it does form a beginning: a way in which we can start to see ourselves differently through the eyes of God. It can be a way in which we can shed the guilt of what generations have done before us and begin to move forward in deeper relationship. The only way that it will succeed in the end, I am convinced, is if we work to see each other and ourselves differently.

-May you be freed to see things a little differently this week. I pray that you may be able to look past the blemishes and be able to forgive others as well as yourself. With God's help, may we as the body of Christ be able to work for a world that radically forgives and sees differently. Amen.