

With just two girls in a family of older boys, my sister and I defined ourselves over and against each other for much of our childhood. I've talked about this before... My sister was pink and I was blue. She liked dolls and I liked GI Joe. She liked to sew and I liked to cook. She was good at math and science and I was good at art.

For my own part, one way that I defined myself was as the "good girl" over and against my sister as the "troublemaker." She wasn't bad in the sense that she stayed out late and got into trouble. It was more the case that she was likelier to argue with my mom, to push back against the rules and to get into stuff she was supposed to stay out of. Whatever it was she did that she wasn't supposed to do, I made it clear that I wasn't doing those things.

I used my sister and her actions as a foil to define myself. Both in my own mind and to others. I didn't really see my sister for who she was, or how she was trying to know herself and show herself to others. In fact, I didn't really "see" and understand her and the things she was going through until many years later.

Instead, I used who she was as a measure of who I was. I used her to feel better about myself. I may not be as tall or as smart, but at least I wasn't breaking the rules. At least I wasn't always arguing.

Certainly when we are children, but often in ways that continue in our adult life, we measure ourselves against others as a way of feeling better about ourselves. I may not be as smart or make as much as others, but at least I'm not as bad as so-and-so. At least I'm not making the poor choices that she's making. At least I'm farther along in life than

he is... It's a way that we bolster ourselves against the uncertainties of life. But when we define ourselves over and against others, we don't see those others for who they really are.

For some of us though, it's the opposite. We don't measure ourselves against others to lift ourselves up. Rather, we look at others as a way of confirming our own feelings of worthlessness. See what they've done...what they've accomplished. See how good their life is... that just proves how things aren't going right for me, how things never go right for me. We're still using others as a measure of our own life and in the same way, that measuring keeps us from seeing those others for who they really are and what they really experience.

The "I may have problems, but I'm not as bad as so-and-so" perspective denies the reality of the other and denies the reality that we all stand under the same need of God's forgiveness and grace.

The "I'll never be as good as so-and-so" perspective also denies the reality of the other but it also denies the reality that we are all equally deserving of God's forgiveness and grace.

In our gospel lesson today, Simon the Pharisee sees the woman anointing Jesus feet and says to himself, "If Jesus were really a prophet, he would know what kind of a woman this is that is touching him, he would know she is a sinner."

So, she's a sinner but somehow Simon is not—or at least not as much of a sinner in his own mind. He's measuring himself against her and she's coming out on the short end. Not only that, he's measuring Jesus, who for his lack of foresight with regard to this woman couldn't possibly be a prophet.

But interestingly enough, Jesus *is* able to hear the words Simon has spoken only to himself. And he tells him this parable.

There's a creditor, maybe the owner of Greater Judea First Bank and Trust. And he has two debtors. One owed 500 denarii and the other 50. A denarii was equivalent to a day's wage, so we'll say the first debtor owed \$50,000 and the second owed only \$5,000. When these debtors could not pay, the loan officer at Greater Judea First Bank and Trust cancelled the debts of both of them. Jesus then asks Simon which of the debtors would love that loan officer more. Simon readily understands that the one with the greater debt has the greater love.

Then Jesus says to Simon, "Do you *see* this woman?"

Jesus wants to make an adjustment to Simon's vision. He wants him to see the woman in a way that goes beyond simply measuring himself over and against her sinfulness. And so Jesus does a little of his own measuring:

When Jesus arrived Simon provided no water for his feet, but the woman bathed his feet with her tears and dried them with her hair.

Simon gave no kiss of greeting, but from the time Jesus arrived the woman has not stopped kissing his feet.

Simon didn't anoint Jesus' head with oil, but the woman anointed his feet with ointment.

Jesus is saying to Simon, if you're going to measure yourself against this woman with eyes that are truly willing to see, you may well find you come up short. You may well find yourself wanting.

Measuring ourselves against others can be risky business, especially when we're willing to truly see them.

And Simon is so busy measuring the sins of the woman—with eyes that are quick to see her sin but so very blind to his own—that he misses the sign of God's kingdom in the woman's extravagant response to God's grace. He's so busy measuring that he's unable to see that which cannot be measured.

Most scholars assume from a close reading of this story that the woman has come with her alabaster jar of ointment because she has already had an encounter with either Jesus or John the Baptist, who is mentioned just prior to today's text in Luke's gospel. In verse 47, Jesus says, "Therefore I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love." The verb tense for the forgiveness is perfect, describing an action that has happened in the past, but that has implications for the present.

It's no accident that this woman has shown up at Simon's house with an alabaster jar of ointment. It's not like she traveled with that alabaster jar in her back pocket. She came there on purpose, because she heard that Jesus would be there. Because her gratitude for the grace shown her is so great that she cannot help but respond.

She has received grace beyond measure, and her thankfulness itself is unmeasured.

Let's go back to Jesus' parable. I imagine that there are many of us here that have some debt. And likely some of us have pretty significant debt. Imagine, for a moment, how it would feel if a representative from Wells Fargo, or Bank of America, or GMAC

called you one day to say, don't worry about that loan, or that mortgage payment, we're going to call it even. You're good to go, your slate is wiped clean.

How would that feel to you? And imagine if you'd heard those words at a time in your life when you were struggling to make ends meet, when the monthly paycheck was never quite big enough, when your nights were uneasy as you ran calculation after calculation in your head, when that debt and the accompanying worry sat like a weight on your shoulders. Then how would it feel when that loan officer from GMAC called and said, "it's paid, you're all good." Imagine the feeling of that weight lifted from your shoulders.

That's what it was like for the woman.

And that's what it's like for each of us every day, when we are renewed in the promise of our own baptism and forgiven again of all our sins, all those sins known and unknown, seen and unseen, remembered and forgotten.

Because each of us stand equally in need of God's grace and forgiveness. Because there are not bad sins and not so bad sins. There are not serious hurts and mild hurts. There's not grievous pain and so-so pain. There is only sin, and hurt and pain. And we're all guilty, we're all sinners. Always have been and always will be. And we all stand equally in need of God's grace and forgiveness.

And we're not any of us more deserving of God's grace and forgiveness. In fact, we are all less deserving. We have all been created in God's image and we are all loved by God without measure. And there is not one of us who at our very best can be good enough to earn God's grace, to deserve God's grace.

And *that's* why the woman comes to Simon's house with this precious ointment. Because she has received grace and forgiveness that she knows she has not earned and does not deserve. And she knows what it is to have that weight lifted from her shoulders. She has received forgiveness and she is compelled to show her gratitude. And so she responds with extravagant love with a love that knows no bounds or limits.

There's a song about this woman sung by Cece Winans called Alabaster Box and the second verse goes like this:

I can't forget  
The way life used to be  
I was a prisoner  
To the sins that had me bound  
I spent my days  
Poured my life-without measure  
Into a little treasure box  
I thought I had found  
Until the day-when Jesus came to me  
And healed my soul  
With the wonders of-His love  
So now I'm giving back to Him  
All the praise He's worthy of  
I've been forgiven  
And that's why  
I love Him so much.

We have all been forgiven with a grace that we have not earned and do not deserve. Feel the weight lifted from your shoulders and give God the praise he's worthy of.