

The Teachable Moment

Time after Pentecost
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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

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

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Every Tuesday morning, the staff at Trinity gathers for a meeting. We have devotions, go over the calendar, discuss the reports of various committees, report on our own tasks, and reflect on the previous week's worship services. We also have something called "*Teachable Moment*." That could consist of almost anything, but it's usually a moment where our eyes are opened to something we'd not noticed or considered before. In fact, sometimes that teachable moment was right in front of us all along as we moved through the other parts of our staff meeting. We suddenly realize we've had that teachable moment. Something's been framed in a new light; we see it through Christ's eyes.

But it usually takes one person to point it out to the rest of us. That's what Jesus does in our Gospel lesson today—points out to Simon the "*Teachable Moment*" right in front of him. (As a point of reference, this "Simon" is not the disciple "Simon Peter." This Simon is a religious leader who invites Jesus to dinner.)

The teachable moment is the woman who walked into the dinner **uninvited**. Now, it wasn't that no one noticed her. Oh, she was noticed all right. The problem is those present at the dinner, with the exception of Jesus, only saw her in human terms, with human labels. Jesus wanted Simon and the other dinner guests to see her through Jesus' eyes. **And learn from her.**

Yes, they noticed her. They had her sized up right from the beginning. Luke tells us in his gospel what they knew of her and what they thought of her: *She was a sinner*. Funny, we never learn from Luke exactly what **made** her a sinner. But isn't it strange that, somehow, over the centuries, people have continued to suggest that she was a prostitute. She's forever being labeled extra-biblically (in other words, outside of scriptural evidence) as a person engaged in sexual sins. Maybe it was her boldness at touching Jesus, washing and perfuming and kissing his feet, wiping them dry with her hair. That's a very physical, almost intimate act. Not to mention that a woman in polite society wouldn't have let her hair down in public. So, every thing she does is inappropriate by conventional standards—though not by Jesus' standards, which will become the teachable moment. But I figure all that "inappropriateness" led scholars and readers to assume she was a prostitute. I say it's time we let go of that assumption, as well as all the baggage we add on to that label. But we do need to deal with Simon's labeling and assuming, as well as what the other guests thought of her. Her devotion to Jesus is grossly misinterpreted. Because they already see her as a sinner, her touching Jesus is shameful and wrong. She shouldn't touch a righteous man of God. Nor does this make Jesus look very good. Jesus, if he were really someone who knew the letter of the Law, if he were really a righteous man, well, he would recoil from her touch, not encourage it. Luke records Simon, thinking 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.”*

Whatever kind of woman Simon thinks she is, it's clear Simon will never think of her as anything **other** than that. And all the “inappropriate” things she does? They simply confirm his label, his assumptions of her. The label sticks. Yes, she's that kind of woman.

In his book, *Blood Done Sign My Name*, author Timothy Tyson describes a childhood experience in the segregated south. Tyson's father was a Methodist pastor, and in their family, racism and prejudice were considered sins. Timothy was raised to see people of any color as children of God. But one experience reminded him that he, too, was quick to label, to look at someone in human terms, and not through Christ's eyes. One summer, he and his best friend David were playing at his house, and the Tyson family's housekeeper, who was African-American, was busy working. She had brought her young son along for the day. Timothy remembered him as being a nice enough boy, but for some reason, Timothy and David decided they didn't want to play with him, just each other. Only he kept following them around the house. So they ignored him when they could, and then, then David decided to give him a name. A label. I don't have to speak the thing they called him. It was the “N” word. A word that put black people in their place in the south, or anywhere else, for that matter. And they didn't just say the “N” word once. No, they turned it into a mantra, a sing-song insult. Timothy knew it wasn't a nice word. He knew it wasn't kind. He knew it violated everything he'd ever been taught. He knew it violated the housekeeper's son. But he and David decided that the little African-American boy was **that kind** of boy. The label stuck. And nothing the boy could possibly do would have altered their assumption of who he was. To this day, Timothy is ashamed by what he did. Ashamed and repentant that he would so willingly ascribe to the notion that, as he put it, “*another child of God could belong to a category less than human.*”

Do we ever feel ashamed? We label people all the time. We take one look, and figure they're this or that, placing them into various categories: *They must not make much money. He probably doesn't have an education. She's obviously from the “wrong side of the tracks.” You can tell he's got mental problems. They're not the kind of people you should hang around with.*

Then our labels stick. And it would take a lot for our assumptions to change. Because once we've labeled someone, we can ignore any evidence to the contrary about them. We can ignore **them**.

Isn't that what Simon does? I mean, he's busy noticing and thinking about this woman and her “inappropriate” acts, but he's actually removed himself from discovering anything else about her that might dissuade him from attaching that label. He is quite certain he has absolutely nothing left to learn from her that he doesn't already know.

But Jesus won't let Simon ignore the woman, and make assumptions about her activities and the motive for her activities. He won't let Simon's label stick, and he forces Simon to look at her again, only this time through Jesus' eyes.

Of course, Jesus needs to have a teachable moment within his teachable moment. So, he tells a story to bring clarity of sight to Simon. The story involves two people who owe money to the same person. One owes a lot; the other owes a little. Both have their debts forgiven. And Jesus poses the question about who will love the creditor more? Who will be more grateful at the forgiveness of the debt? Well, naturally, says Simon, the one who was forgiven more.

Jesus uses this story, not to inform Simon that the woman was a much bigger sinner than he, but rather, that her over-the-top response to forgiveness demonstrates what a wonderful gift forgiveness is, and how open she is to the difference it and Jesus will make in her life. In comparison, consider Simon's rather sparse hospitality as the dinner host. Simon is, to be honest, miserly in his response to Jesus' presence. Jesus takes note of this. Simon really doesn't get it about Jesus. Simon wouldn't recognize forgiveness and grace if it hit him square in the face, and even then, he still wouldn't think it was necessary.

What's more, Simon, having labeled the woman already, unwilling to see her in any way but how he sees her—a sinner—just doesn't notice her new status. And who is she in Jesus' eyes? A child of God, a woman of value, a disciple in faith, a sinner who has been forgiven and made new. That's what kind of woman she is.

So Jesus turns to the woman, forces Simon and the other dinner guests to focus on that woman once again. He forces them to consider not only her acts, but also the motive for her acts. She is responding to the gift of forgiveness with love and gratitude. That's why she does what she does. The forgiveness has had such an enormous effect on her life, on who she is, that her loving response is equally extravagant. She loves much in return for the new status she has been given. She loves in the manner that Jesus loves—with *agape* love, which is serving, caring, devoted, self-less love.

Thus this unnamed woman we have labeled through the centuries becomes Simon's teacher. The woman's own actions of love, thankfulness, servanthood, and humility should serve as teachable moments. Teach Simon that all of us need forgiveness, and God is right there to grant it. Teach Simon that our labels are swept away as God embraces us. Teach Simon about what it means to receive God's gifts and be open to all the ways he might transform us into "little Christs." Teach Simon about real love and hospitality.

Simon has much to learn, and so do we. **AMEN.**