

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 Jesus 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 cancelled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?" Simon answered, "I suppose the one for whom he cancelled the greater debt." And Jesus said to him, "You have judged rightly."

Then turning towards 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."

A little over twenty years ago, when our daughter Annie was just turning five years old, we moved from Portland, Oregon to Clarendon Hills where I was called to serve as pastor. It was a big move for us, but it was wonderful and right. Soon Annie started kindergarten, and, of course, Sunday school.

That first Sunday morning in late August, after worship services had wrapped up and we finished chatting at coffee hour in fellowship hall, John and Annie and I headed home, walking our easy two blocks home from church. I remember clear as day asking Annie how she liked Sunday school. She stomped her feet and shook her head and said with irritation, “Jesus, Jesus, Jesus. All we ever talked about was Jesus. When do we get to do some math?”

Truth be told, some of us never get past that question, even if we do not know it. We want math more than we want Jesus ... which is the point of the Scripture today.

Let’s start with Simon the Pharisee. Simon is a good man, a faithful man:

- First, Simon values community, welcoming Jesus into his home. Community is a very high Biblical moral value. And unlike Jesus’ interactions with some other Pharisees, there’s no indication of ill intent ... no hint that Simon wants to trap Jesus. Simon simply welcomes Jesus to his table, a kind gesture.
- Second, Simon values purity, according to the Biblical moral code. Simon no doubt aspires to be morally pure by keeping Sabbath, telling

the truth, honoring his parents, and so on. The presence of a sinful woman would no doubt have shocked him; and worse, her mere presence would make him and his guests impure.

- Third, Simon values justice, which is a high moral value. In the Bible, justice is all about fairness: if someone lies, steals, cheats, etc., the offender must confess, pay restitution, give a sin offering in worship, and only then, receive forgiveness (cf. Lev. 6:1-7 and Num. 5:5-7).ⁱ

Honestly, I like Simon. He's a good and faithful man. Simon tries to match his priorities to God's priorities: community, purity, and justice.ⁱⁱ

The problem, Jesus tells us, is that Simon misunderstands *the order of* God's priorities. For example: Jesus values community more highly than purity, which is the opposite of Simon. Simon values purity more. I don't mean to get political, but we have modern examples: I'm sure, like Vice President Pence, Simon would never ever be in the presence of a woman alone without his wife. And to knowingly allow a woman who is a prostitute touch him, as Jesus did? It is utterly disgusting! I wonder how any of us would honestly respond to that. Imagine your own dinner party. It's hard to imagine it passing the social code in Lake Forest. Just imagine what the gossip-mongers would do with *that*.

So in the tension between community and purity, Jesus and Simon have very different priorities. But there's one other significant way that Jesus and Simon differ: they have vastly different understandings of what *justice* means. This is where our love of math comes in; bear with me.

On the surface, Simon clearly gets it right. In the Biblical system, justice means fairness: an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, and so on, right? One equals one; two equals two. Which is largely how we think of justice still. It's how our own legal system still operates. Marjorie Thompson, whose study guide we've been following this Lent, describes it this way:

“Our legal systems depend on an understanding of justice as punishment for the offender. The way to balance the scales of justice according to this norm is to impose penalties against the guilty – punishments from community service to prison to execution. We sometimes call this the penal system, reflecting our assumption that penalties are the proper way to achieve justice and give the victims satisfaction. ... People should have to pay for their transgressions, and this involves suffering a loss of freedom if not one's life.”

Give and take. Fair's fair. You get what you deserve. That's the math of justice. If the sin you commit is minor –you drive without a license – let's say that's worth ten points on the moral scale. So you must do something to pay back those ten points. If the harm you do someone is worth 100 points - say, you damage another car while driving –you have to pay back those 100 points plus a little more. And if the debt you owe is worth 10,000 points on the moral scale – say, you kill someone in the accident you caused - then you in turn must pay 10,000, plus a heavier fine. It's not an accident that we call them the scales of justice, scales that weigh the crime against the punishment. We want life to be fair. We want life to be even. We want life to be mathematically balanced. Which is utterly understandable when we've been wronged, when we feel robbed, when we've lost things – or worse yet, people whom we love. Nothing can ever undo the hurt we've experienced. But at least the other party

should pay the price too. Which is why, like Annie the five-year-old, and like Simon the faithful Pharisee, we all prefer math over Jesus.

We all prefer math ... we all prefer math, that is, until the math doesn't work in our favor.

Maybe you've already experienced this. Maybe someone you love dearly is in this place. When the sin that's committed is too grave ... when the harm that's done is too big ... when the debt that's owed is one that can never be repaid. If you have ever had to file for bankruptcy ... if your son has ever been incarcerated ... if you ever cheated on your husband or your wife and wanted to keep your marriage ... if your family member has ever been charged with drug possession, or hurt someone while driving drunk, or been outed for embezzlement, or fill-in-the-blank with your own story. When you, or someone you love, have committed such a wrong as that, a wrong that can *never* be repaid, then there is only one way to ever find life again: if that sin, that harm, that debt is forgiven. Which isn't fair. Which isn't even. Which is when we prefer Jesus over math.

Isn't that what happens to the sinful woman when she comes to Simon's home? She knows she cannot "come clean," literally; for a prostitute, her "payment" for her sins meant being stoned to death. But she has the temerity to come to Jesus, weeping; pouring out an expensive alabaster jar of ointment; wiping his feet with her hair and her tears; humbling herself to kiss his feet in homage. She does not come to pay restitution, *because there is nothing she can pay*. Instead, she comes to receive the forgiveness that Jesus has already granted. She does not come to make things even. Instead, she comes to give thanks that her debt has been wiped clean by love, a debt she could never repay.

Is it unfair? Of course it is. But is it unjust? Maybe. Then again ... maybe not.

What if we got the meaning of justice wrong? What if we missed God's intention?

Bear with me here. If we believe that the only kind of justice is retributive – that the only kind of justice is mathematical, weighing and measuring sin against payment – then yes, the forgiveness Jesus offers is unjust. But what if there's another kind of justice? What if the highest value isn't *purity*, which requires punishment for the individual who sins? What if the highest value isn't *fairness*, which requires restitution, or even retribution? What if God's ultimate goal is, instead, *community*: the *restoration of a human life*, the *healing of community*?

There's a name for this kind of justice: "restorative justice." This kind of justice doesn't pretend nothing happened. This kind of justice doesn't sugar-coat the debt or sin. This kind of justice doesn't sweep the offense under the rug. Instead, as we would with our own children, restorative justice searches out ways to hold the guilty accountable *with the larger goal of their growth and restoration*. That's not cheap grace. That's not toxic charity. That kind of justice – it is the work of love.

"What," Marjorie Thompson asks, "What, finally, is the purpose of justice? Is punishment the goal, or restoration of a fully human life? God is far more interested in making new beginnings than in satisfying penal codes. God exercises judgment in the service of salvation ... [God] grants mercy in hopes of reclaiming us from the sad spectacle of our sin and its consequences. God has designs for a future ..." A future, and a hope.

There's a difference between retributive justice and restorative justice. Unlike retributive justice, the goal of restorative justice isn't to make things *even*. The goal of restorative justice is to make things *new*.

Which is what Jesus came to do. He didn't come to make all things *even*. He came to make all things *new*.

Look, I don't know what injustices you're hanging on to still, what grudges you're still nursing, what wrongs you have yet to forgive. I know what I'm clinging to, and it's not pretty. I sure don't know what of your own sins you haven't admitted to yourself ... or what of your own debts you haven't forgiven. But this much I do know: God's love is so large, that "while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8). None of us earned it. None of us deserve it. None of us paid for it. But Christ died for us anyway. And the sooner we "get it" about the vastness of God's love, the more able we'll be to receive it. And the sooner we receive it, the more we'll be able to share that love, that compassion, that welcome to the table of grace.

Oh – one more thing. Simon the Pharisee? He preferred math over Jesus. But here's what he never understood. Jesus didn't disdain math. He just chose a different formula. What the sinful woman knew that Simon never understood is this: Jesus took all her sins, and multiplied them by zero. May we be blessed to learn to love the math of Jesus too.

Amen.

ⁱ Marjorie J. Thompson, *Forgiveness: A Lenten Study* (Louisville: WJK Press, 2014), P. 59.

ⁱⁱ I encourage you to read Jonathan Haidt's book, *The Righteous Mind*, for a modern treatment of the tensions in our moral code.