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“Do You See This Woman”

A Sermon delivered by Rev. Dr. Josh Hunt at Myers Park Baptist Church

On March 9, 2025, from Luke 7:36-50.

I was eleven years old on May 19, 1992, and those of you who are of a certain age might just remember that something weird happened that day - a bizarre convergence of several cultural events.

First, it was an election year. In six months, Bill Clinton would be elected and make George H.W. Bush a one-term president. For both campaigns, the spring and summer of '92 served as the time to accentuate the differences between the candidates and their visions for the country.

Second, the Los Angeles Police officers who had been videotaped beating Rodney King had been acquitted of that beating just a few weeks before.¹ South Central LA erupted into violence and unrest as the news spread. A national conversation ensued.

Third, it was “May sweeps” – the time when tv networks measure their audience sizes to set their advertising rates. It was also the time when sitcom plots were written to attract the largest audiences. For example, on May 18, 1992, the sitcom Murphy Brown had a live episode as the title character, a single mother, gave birth to a baby she decided to raise on her own.² The plot was controversial, and the ratings were huge. Again, a national conversation ensued.

Enter Dan Quayle. May 19, 1992 - the day after that sitcom episode during sweeps week, in a 3000-word speech describing the LA Riots as a symptom of the “breakdown of the family structure,”³ the Vice President had a one-sentence throw-away line about Murphy Brown, suggesting that the plot involving Murphy raising a baby as a single woman “mocked the importance of fathers,”⁴ undermining American values.

I confess that my memory of all of this is as an eleven-year-old, but I do remember it distinctly for a couple of reasons. First of all, we were a Murphy Brown house. Watched every week like clockwork. Secondly, and more importantly, in May of 1992, I was a child being raised by a single mother.

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/1992/04/30/us/the-police-verdict-los-angeles-policemen-acquitted-in-taped-beating.html?smid=url-share>

² <https://www.cnn.com/2024/09/22/entertainment/dan-quayle-murphy-brown-cat-ladies-cec/index.html>

³ <https://voicesofdemocracy.umd.edu/quayle-murphy-brown-speech-text-2/>

⁴ Ibid.



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And so, I heard what the Vice President said as being about us. Dan Quayle dismissed fatherless homes, but I was in one of those, but I didn't think we were contributing to the downfall of American values.

Of course, our situation was certainly different than that of Murphy Brown. My father had died in a car accident three years earlier and raising me fell squarely on my mother's shoulders. She was much younger than I am now. We didn't have the luxury of consulting academic studies to understand the feasibility of successfully raising a child in a single-parent home. I heard authority figures excuse my peers' behavior because there was no male role model in the home. My mom never let me have that excuse. There were no excuses for her, either. She had a son to raise by herself, so she did. She quit her job so she could go back to school to get a job that would pay better and would better enable her to send me to college. My going to college was never in question; I would go, and she would send me. And she did.

Unbeknownst to me at the time, this experience of being nurtured, prepared, and sent—evocative of the way God relates with us—was teaching me about what women are capable of doing. And I now carry that lesson with me in everything I do.

My mother is just one of the many reasons I'm honored to stand before you as you celebrate Women's History Month.

I concede that it wouldn't be fair for me to expect Dan Quayle to address our particular situation in his speech, but I remember hearing that line as an eleven-year-old. I couldn't describe how I felt back then, but I now have the words to say what was going through my mind. I felt we were unseen. Absolutely unseen by an influential person who didn't know or care about our situation. We didn't fit in the narrative the Vice President was constructing that day, so we were left out. Just another single-parent household. But we were not just that.

There are several converging themes in this rich story from Luke's gospel. Jesus was having a meal at the home of a Pharisee.⁵ Amy-Jill Levine⁶, New Testament scholar at Vanderbilt, suggests that Christians often make Pharisees a trope: self-righteous, misogynist, elitist hypocrites – and we can certainly read this text that way if we are not careful. Levine says that, in point of fact, the Pharisees were concerned with the practice of their faith, and they were flexible in their interpretation of scripture.

⁵ Luke 7:36

⁶ Sievers, J., & Levine, A.-J. (2021). *The Pharisees*. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.



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Hear again what Simon the Pharisee, the owner of the house where Jesus is a dinner guest, 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.”⁷

He didn’t throw the woman out of his home. He didn’t point a finger at her. He thought to himself, Luke tells us. “He thought to himself...” This makes me exceedingly glad that the things I *think to myself* aren’t published for everyone to read.

And that’s my point: perhaps when we malign the Pharisee, we miss the opportunity to examine the times when we draw conclusions about others – creating a narrative about their lives, maybe even in dismissive ways, but within the privacy of our own thoughts, lest we have to bear any responsibility for thinking that way. We will change our mind about someone given more evidence, but give us some credit: our initial assessments about others are usually correct, aren’t they? Maybe not.

If the Pharisees can be literary tropes, this woman can also be unseen – covered up by all the swirling narratives around her in this story. Luke’s introduction of her reads like a newspaper report: “a woman in the city, who was a sinner...”⁸ But—my goodness! —his telling of what she did is so rich and full of detail that the aroma of the smell of the perfume practically fills our nostrils. She wept. She kissed Jesus’s feet. She bathed Jesus’ feet with her tears. She dried her tears with her hair. She anointed his feet with ointment.

I’ve heard more preachers than I can count other-ize her: she was the uninvited guest who broke all the rules of decorum. She was the woman with the extensive past, so thoroughly sinful. It was probably sexual sin, they say, though Luke does not say that.

I see in her a wonderful Lenten example of material sacrifice, though in John’s gospel, Judas was harping on how much good could’ve been done if that now-wasted perfume had been donated and sold.⁹ I also see in her a wonderful Lenten example of demonstrated gratitude, though it made Simon uneasy.

Oh, and Jesus clocked that, too – Simon’s uneasiness. He knew what was on Simon’s heart. The kicker for me—did you catch this? —is that Simon essentially said to himself, *if Jesus was any kind of prophet, he’d see her the way I see her* - essentially, “I’m not sure how you see her, Jesus, but God and I have her figured out.”

⁷ Luke 7:39b

⁸ Luke 7:37

⁹ John 12:3-8



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So, Jesus told a parable about forgiveness, hooking Simon in. “Which of the two servants will love the moneylender more?”¹⁰

Simon answered, “I suppose the one who had the greater debt forgiven.” “You judged rightly.” Simon passed the placement exam. Next comes what I think is the real question. “Simon, do you see this woman?”¹¹ A damning question, especially since it was followed by this list of vicious contrasts between Simon and the woman. And Jesus’ description of his experience at Simon’s house.

I almost imagine Jesus gently taking her by the shoulders and pointing her toward Simon, so they can look in each other’s eyes. “Do you see this woman?” Notably, Simon does not answer.

In his bestselling book *How to Know a Person*, David Brooks looks at some of our societal challenges¹²: Suicide is up by 30%. Depression rates are skyrocketing. 36% of Americans report feeling lonely frequently. 45% of teenagers say they feel despondent and hopeless most of the time. The number of people who say they have no close personal friends has gone up by four times. 36% more Americans are not in a romantic relationship. The number of Americans who rate themselves in the lowest happiness category has gone up by 50%.

Brooks suggests that we have an epidemic of blindness - of people not feeling seen, valued, and heard. And he says that when you feel not seen, you regard that as an insult, which it is, and an injustice, which it is. And so, you lash out. And a society that becomes more sad eventually becomes more mean. The owner of a restaurant he frequents in New York told him that he kicks patrons out every week for rude behavior. Never used to happen.¹³ His sister is a nurse in New Jersey, and she said – and perhaps those of you who are in healthcare would agree - that her main challenge is keeping nurses because the patients have become so abusive, the nurses want to leave their profession.¹⁴

I said earlier that we believe our initial assessments of people are usually correct. David Brooks told about a study at the University of Texas. Researchers found that the average person, when they meet a stranger and start a conversation, accurately understands what's going on in that person's head 20% of the time. With friends and family, it goes up to 35% of the time.

¹⁰ Luke 7:42

¹¹ Luke 7:44

¹² Brooks, David. (2023). *How to Know a Person: The Art of Seeing Others Deeply and Being Deeply Seen*. Random House, 97-98.

¹³ Ibid, 100.

¹⁴ Ibid.



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Some people are pretty good: they're correct 55% of the time. And some people are correct 0% of the time but think they're correct 100% of the time.¹⁵

The solution is not to try to be better guessers, but to take the time to get to know someone. To see someone.

He says there are people who are diminishers and there are people who are illuminators.¹⁶ The diminishers are not curious about other people. They stereotype. They ignore. They don't ask questions. Brooks says he thinks that only about 30% of the people you meet are question askers. They are persistently curious about you. The other 70% are perfectly nice people. They're just not questioners. And those are the people he calls diminishers.

Illuminators, on the other hand, are people who are curious about you and make you feel special and lit up.

“Simon, do you see this woman?” I think I can answer that: Simon perceived her, but he did not see her.

When we moved from North Carolina to South Carolina back in 2012, there was a time when I maintained my old habit of reading *The Observer*. And I was reading one night about the death of Chilly Willy. Locals may remember Chilly Willy, who was for a time this city's most famous unhoused person.¹⁷

William Larry Major, who had actually moved into an apartment at Moore Place and gave up his famous nickname once he found a place to live, was struck by a car and killed as he crossed the street.¹⁸ The article I was reading included a picture, and my two-year old son came up to see what I was reading, pointed to the picture of Willy – a white guy with long hair and a beard – and said, “Look it's Jesus.”

Of course he was right. Then and there, I prayed, “Lord, give me eyes to see you as readily as my son just did – and help him keep those wonderful eyes for you.” I would like to offer a similar prayer for us today, too. Please pray with me.

¹⁵ Ibid, 14-15.

¹⁶ Ibid, 28-42.

¹⁷ I could not locate the original article from *The Observer*, but the picture in Major's obituary is the picture I refer to in the story. <https://www.legacy.com/us/obituaries/charlotte/name/william-major-obituary?id=52170300>

¹⁸ <https://www.wsocvtv.com/news/local/pedestrian-hit-killed-crash-7th-st/223254646/>