

Haydenville Congregational Church
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April 20, 1912, Fenway Park opened its doors. In that opening game, the Boston Red Sox defeated the New York Highlanders who later became the New York Yankees in 11 innings in front of 27,000 people. Since that time, the Red Sox have played thousands of games in that stadium. The largest crowd at Fenway was over 47,000 in 1935 against, you guessed it, the Yankees. Nowadays, the seating capacity for Fenway Park is 37,402 for night games, and slightly less for day games. Not only has the seating capacity changed, but the name has been changed from the Pilgrims to the Red Sox. Not only has the seating capacity changed and the name changed but skyview seats have been installed and bullpens and lights have been added. There have been lots of changes to the team and to Fenway Park.

One of the things that hasn't changed, though, is the view from Grandstand sections 1- 33. You see, in Grandstand sections 1-33, there are approximately 26 poles measuring about 16 inches wide that come in handy for supporting the press box and the premium seats but not so handy for seeing home plate or the pitcher's mound for about 3% of all seats located in the Grandstand sections. The poles obstruct the view for the people sitting in those seats. Now, I'm not a big baseball fan, but I know enough to know that seeing the pitcher and home plate are pretty

important. After all, you wanna be able to see if the pitcher throws a fastball or a curveball. You wanna see if the pitcher catches the person on first base trying to steal second. And, I know enough to know that you may wanna see who's running in to get a home run. These are important things. But, the poles obstruct the view of the things you really want and need to see.

Sometimes there are physical obstructions or impediments to seeing like at Fenway Park. Sometimes there are physical structures that prevent us from seeing. Sometimes we have to strain our necks to see around something that is blocking our view. And sometimes we have to squat or stand on the tips of our toes in order to see. Yes, there are times when we have physical obstructions. Other times, though, there are other things that obstruct our view. There are times when we find ourselves in situations like Simon the Pharisee in today's text. Simon didn't have anything that physically kept him from seeing. But, he clearly had trouble with his vision.

Let's look at this a little more closely. We know from the reading of the scripture that Simon had invited Jesus over for a meal. We don't know what prompted the invitation but in that day and time it wasn't unusual for a religious leader like Simon to invite a rabbi or teacher like Jesus over for a meal. Simon and Jesus, along with some other people at the table are reclining after the meal. A woman, whose name we don't get to know is also there. It's possible that she got

there before Jesus did. She found out he was going to be there and showed up. She showed up with an expensive jar of ointment. We don't know who the woman was. We don't know her name and we don't know why she was crying. But, we do know that she bathed Jesus' feet with her tears and she dried them with her hair. She kissed his feet and then anointed them with ointment.

Simon saw all of this is going on. I can just picture him standing off to the side with his brow furrowed and mouth turned up. His blood pressure had probably gone up or his pulse had gotten a little faster. He looked at the scene and made a couple of quick conclusions. The first one was the woman was a sinner. For some people, the fact that the woman was there at all was inappropriate. Women rarely dined with men and those who did were often prostitutes. Her mere presence made her suspect. Some scholars mention the fact that her hair was loose as evidence of who she was. There are some who suggest that she was loose morally because her hair was down. And what about that alabaster jar of ointment? Alabaster was expensive and considered a luxury. The fact that this woman had it signifies some level of wealth- wealth possibly gained by being a prostitute. Add all these things up, according to Simon, and you have a sinner. When you add all these things up, you have someone who shouldn't be in the room at all let alone do what she's doing.

This leads to the second conclusion he reached. And, the second conclusion is predicated on the first. What Simon thought about the woman indicated what he thought about Jesus. The second conclusion Simon reached was that there was no way that Jesus could be a prophet. A prophet, after all, would not allow himself to be touched by this woman. A prophet would not want to risk defilement. A prophet would know, Simon said to himself, who and what this woman is.

Simon observed this woman's appearance and her behavior and reached a conclusion. He noted Jesus' response to her and reached another conclusion. But Simon did not *see* her *or* Jesus. Jesus knew what Simon was thinking and told a parable about a creditor and two debtors. He wanted to know if Simon would get his point about the woman. He wanted to see if Simon's perceptions would be changed.

In verse 44, Jesus asked Simon a poignant question. He was talking to Simon but he turned toward the woman as he asked, "Do you see this woman?" Jesus wanted to know if Simon saw her. He wasn't asking if he noticed what her outfit looked like or what style her hair was in. Jesus wanted to know if Simon *really* saw this woman. He wanted to know if Simon saw anything beyond what his limited, obstructed view told him was in front of him.

The fact is, church, that the woman had already been forgiven before she arrived at Simon's house. The Bible doesn't give a record of it but according to

Barbara Reid, a professor of New Testament Studies at Catholic Theological Union, the verb tense of the word used for ‘have been forgiven’ actually indicates a past action whose effects endure into the present. When Jesus tells her that her sins had been forgiven, he was just affirming what had already been done. Her weeping, her kisses, and her anointing were expressions of her gratitude not expressions of her sinfulness. Simon’s view of her was obstructed. He saw what his culture told him to see. He saw what he wanted to see.

I was upset at Simon looking at the woman this way. I thought, how dare you? How dare you project your prejudices onto her? How dare you size her up and judge her? You don’t even know her. Well, soon after I got self-righteous I got honest. I, too, have had my view obstructed. I have been guilty of letting something or some set of circumstances get in the way of me seeing someone. The student who lied to me about having a hamster in her room at Smith doesn’t get many opportunities to become much more than that in my mind. When I see her on campus, that’s who she is to me. That is who she is reduced to. Haven’t we all “Simoned” someone?

Think about the last person you were in relationship with or your current partner. When you think about that person, do you remember any of the wonderful things they did for you or when you think of them, do you think of the hurtful things? Have the hurtful things become the only chapter in their book with you?

Or is there more to the story? Other chapters in the book? The classmate who you haven't tried to get to know because of what you heard about them deserves a second look. What about the person who has a different religious belief or different race or sexual orientation? Have we given them a chance to be more than a stereotype? When the name Bill Clinton is mentioned do we automatically think about Whitewater or get an image of him denying involvement with Monica Lewinsky? Or do we remember that he appointed Joycelyn Elders, the first African American surgeon general or that he created the Family and Medical Leave Act or that during his administration the U.S. had its lowest levels of unemployment and highest levels of home ownership? When you think about George W. Bush, do you think about the creation of Every Child Will Be Left Behind or his handling of September 11th or Hurricane Katrina or do you remember the good things he did like... Well, you get my point. People are always more complex than what we see or the stories we make up about them in our minds.

Some of us don't have obstructed views when it comes to other people. We forgive easily. We see people for who they really are. We've worked really hard to keep our prejudices in check. Maybe we don't have those challenges. Maybe we have what I will call an internal Simon. An internal Simon is a voice or a belief that keeps us from seeing ourselves as the wonderful beautiful beings that God

created. Our internal Simon tells us that if we've made a mistake then we must be defined by it. Our internal Simon tells us that we'll never be good enough or smart enough or *whatever* enough. Our internal Simon can make it hard to really believe that God loves us or that anybody else could love us. Our internal Simon obstructs our view of ourselves.

Fortunately, we don't take our cues from Simons about how to live and love in the world. Simon saw a sinful woman but Jesus saw a sacred worshiper. Simon's view was limiting and restrictive but Jesus' view was liberating and revolutionary. Simon's view brought hurt and isolation but Jesus' view brought healing and inclusion.

Jesus offers us a chance to re-imagine ourselves and one another. Jesus offers us an unobstructed view from the Fenway Parks of our lives. We don't have to have anything obstructing our view. We don't have to miss out on seeing what we want and need to see. All we have to do is ask God to show us how to see creation the way God sees us- forgiven, loved, and wonderfully made. All we have to do is be willing to open ourselves to the deepest love possible- the wildly expansive love of God. Amen.

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