

Do You See This Woman?

Luke 7:36-50

Martin B. Copenhaver

Wellesley Congregational Church, Wellesley, Massachusetts

Jesus asks a lot of questions in the gospels—307 different questions, to be exact. (No, I did not count them myself, but someone did.) I am told Jesus only directly answers three questions of the 183 questions he is asked in the four gospels. Instead of answering a lot questions, Jesus responds in other ways. In some instances, Jesus simply keeps silent, as when Pilate questions him after his arrest. Or, Jesus responds to a question with another question. When asked, “Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?” Jesus responds, “Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites?” And then, pointing to a coin, “Whose head is this, and whose title?” (It reminds me of the old Jewish joke, “Why does a Jew always answer a question with a question?” Answer: “Why shouldn’t a Jew always answer a question with a question?”) Or, sometimes Jesus responds to questions indirectly. For example, when Jesus is asked, “Who is my neighbor?” he responds by telling the parable of the Good Samaritan. Obviously, Jesus prefers to ask questions rather than to provide answers. For every question he answers directly, he asks a hundred questions. He is not the ultimate answer man, but more like the Great Questioner. Does that surprise you?

Catholic author Richard Rohr writes, “In general, we can see that Jesus’ style is almost exactly the opposite of modern televangelism or even the mainline church approach of ‘Dear Abby’ bits of inspiring advice and workable solutions for daily living. Jesus is too much the Jewish prophet to merely stabilize the status quo with platitudes.”

Jesus is not a giver of advice. He doesn’t give us a neat list of ten ways we can be closer to God. He doesn’t offer spiritual tips. He does not provide easy answers. Instead he asks hard questions. In that he is more like the Zen master who asks questions to take us beyond the obvious to something deeper. He is like Socrates who taught the people simply by asking probing questions. He is like the prophets, who railed against the ruling authorities and sought justice by asking challenging questions.

So why have we paid so little attention to the Jesus who asks questions and instead have focused on his seeming answers? Here is Richard Rohr’s response to that question: “[Answers] give us more of a feeling of success and closure.... Easy answers instead of hard questions allow us to try to change others instead of allowing God to change us.”

In today’s gospel reading, Jesus is having dinner at the home of a Pharisee. A woman, who is described only as a sinner, crashes the party, falls at Jesus’ feet and begins to “bathe his feet with her tears.” Because this woman is known as a sinner, she is an outcast. People in polite company would have nothing to do with her. She would be overlooked. Upright people would act as if she doesn’t exist.

So when Jesus asks, “Do you see this woman?” it is a probing and challenging question. The woman may be right in front of them, but that does not mean that they see her. Sometimes people choose not to see. That’s because there is a cost to

seeing. After all, if you see this woman, actually see this woman, you may need to move beyond the stereotypes and the preconceptions and the condemnations. You might have to relate to her as a person, as one soul to another soul. You might have to respond to her with compassion. “Do you see this woman?” Do you even want to see this woman? No, in some ways, it is easier not to see.

Most of my early life was spent within the gravitational field of New York City, and I spent a good deal of time in the city itself. A while back, I was going to see a play with some friends from other parts of the country, and so they are less familiar with the city’s sometimes strange and difficult ways. As we walked to the theatre, I had a certain spring in my step. After all, I was with people I enjoy, the exhilarating rhythms of the city were all around us, and I had in my pocket tickets to the hottest show in town.

To get to the theatre we had to walk through a particularly tough neighborhood. No problem, I assured my companions. I’ve done it many times. Conversation flowed. There was much laughter. And then I realized that my companions had become suddenly silent. Then one said, “Did you see that woman? She looked like a prostitute. Did you see the way she was crying?” Everyone else immediately responded, obviously struck by the same sight.

We walked the next few blocks in silence. The reason for my silence was probably different, however. I had also seen the woman who so haunted the others, but in a sense I didn’t see her at all. Somehow, in all the times I had walked in that neighborhood and ones like it, I had lost some of my ability to see. Do you see this woman? Of course, she’s right in front of me. No, I mean do you actually see this woman? Well... no, not really.

Years ago there was a wonderful New Yorker cartoon by Gahan Wilson in which two men are sitting at a kitchen table drinking beer. There is a single window over the table, but as is true in many city apartments, immediately outside that window is a brick wall. One fellow says to the other, “I like this view. It leaves you alone.”

And is that one of the reasons why some of us live in the places we do? Beyond the good schools, the safe neighborhoods, the elbow room, the relative quiet, do we also choose to live where we do because it offers a view that leaves us alone? Do you see this woman? Do you actually want to see this woman?

One of our congregation’s wonderful young people, Liza Carens, is a student at Connecticut College. She just finished a semester studying in South Africa. Liza—like many who visit that remarkable, beautiful, troubled land—has confronted the stark contrasts found there. She stayed for a week in a rural village with no running water or plumbing. In a letter describing her experience, she writes, “I lived in a one room house with the sweetest mama and her two grandchildren. She gave me her bed and slept on the floor every night so I would be comfortable.”

From there, Liza went to the home of a wealthy Afrikaner family. They had all the amenities of the affluent life, including three cars, a pool, a guesthouse. Sounds nice, doesn’t it? But of all the homes where Liza stayed, she found this one the most uncomfortable. You see, the family has a domestic worker, and the only time they address her is when they are telling her to do something or yelling at her for doing something wrong, like letting the tea get cold. She has a name. Her name is Sara, but most of the time, the family would refer to her as “the domestic worker.” “Leave your key to the guest house on the counter so that the domestic worker can straighten

up.” “Leave your dishes in the sink, and the domestic worker will do them when she returns from her day off.” And, of course, Liza found that quite unsettling. Do you see this woman? Do you actually see Sara?

Earlier this year I got an e-mail from a minister named Bonnie Roseborough, who, in addition to her ministry at a church in suburban New York, is a volunteer chaplain at Sing Sing prison. In that e-mail, she told me that she teaches a class, offered by New York Theological Seminary, for prisoners at Sing Sing. As you may know, Sing Sing is a maximum security prison in Ossining, just north of New York City on the Hudson River. In fact, that’s where the expression “sent up the river” comes from. Most of the prisoners are from New York City. If you are found guilty of a violent crime, you are sent “up the river” to Sing Sing.

The class taught by Bonnie Roseborough is called Foundations of Ministry. It meets for two and-a-half hours every Wednesday afternoon on the prison grounds. She was writing me because she thought I might be interested that the students in her Sing Sing class were reading a book I co-authored with another minister, Lillian Daniel. The book is called *This Odd and Wondrous Calling*. It offers some personal reflections on the vocation of pastoral ministry. And, indeed, I was curious both about the class and about how the prisoners were responding to the book. So I wrote Pastor Bonnie, as I learned she is called, with some questions. After a bit of back-and-forth on e-mail, she asked if we might be interested in meeting with her class at Sing Sing.

So we did. I have been to prisons before, but frankly, this was something different for me. We learned from Pastor Bonnie that the class has fifteen men enrolled, all of whom are doing “hard time” for violent crimes. They are all serving sentences of over twenty-five years. Some are serving life sentences.

What is your picture of someone found guilty of a violent crime and serving a long prison sentence? I tried to stay open, to not have too many preconceived notions, but I must admit that I wasn’t entirely successful in that. I did have something of a picture. I pictured that the men in the class would be hardened by their experience, guarded, maybe sullen or cynical, perhaps even scornful of these two suburban ministers coming to meet with them. After all, what would we have to say that would be of interest or relevance to their lives?

So after we met Pastor Bonnie, we waited for all of the security measures to be completed. (I learned that, not only is it hard to get out of Sing Sing, it’s not easy to get in, either.) I asked her, “So what do the men in the class make of our coming today?” She said, “Oh, they’re really looking forward to it. They have so little interaction with the outside world. They often feel forgotten, locked up with the key thrown away.”

After our identities were verified, and we had been frisked, we were asked to sign a book, something like an enormous guest book, heavy as a millstone, with yellowed pages that must have gone back years. We went through a lot of doors that would shut behind us with a decisive clang. The room where the class is taught looked like a basement room in an old church where there is a lot of deferred maintenance—cinder block walls, peeling paint, a leaky steam radiator that hissed like a snake. But I only saw that later. What I saw at first were the prisoners who got up to shake our hands, to thank us for coming, to ask, “Would you like a glass of water or some tea?” I just wasn’t expecting that.

We sat down. Pastor Bonnie introduced us to the class and then asked the prisoners to introduce themselves. I think the man in the group who had served the least time had been in Sing Sing for fifteen years, others much longer. At least one man had been in that prison for over thirty years. (I try to remember what I was doing thirty years ago.) It was later explained to us that, in the prison system, it takes a great deal of time to earn the privilege to attend such a class, so it only makes sense that we would see people who had been there for many years.

The members of the class had prepared for our visit, and the prisoners' first question was about the nature of pastoral authority. By the way, in my work with new pastors, I have learned that pastoral authority is one of the first things they have questions about. But I still found it curious that this was the first question in this setting. But then the teacher asked the members of the class, "What are the signs of authority here?"

"Handcuffs, badges, nightsticks," one man said. "Guns. Mace," said another. So, yes, what is the source of a pastor's authority when you don't have any of those things?

There is much more that I could tell you about this experience, but let me summarize by saying that any preconceived notions I might have had were completely blown out of the water. We were warmly welcomed by the men in the class. They were eager to engage with the book and with us. Several of the men were so articulate that, if you closed your eyes, you might think that you were in a seminary classroom at Yale or Princeton. Here's an example: When Pastor Bonnie asked the class, "What is your definition of evil?" one student (I mean, prisoner) gave a definition that was so thoughtful and brilliantly phrased that Pastor Bonnie came back, "George, did you get that answer from a catechism or something?" He said, "No, I got it from my head."

At one point, one of the men said, "So, Martin, in the book you wrote about your wife. How is she? I mean, did she ever go back to that room where she made the banners for worship?"—which is a story I told in the book. He wanted to know how the story ended. Another man asked my co-author, "Lillian, how is your son with diabetes?"

We also learned that the prisoners had raised over six thousand dollars for a local food pantry from the 22 cents an hour that they received for doing menial work. They had also earned enough money to provide back-to-school kits—including items like pencils and even backpacks—for each child who visits the prison. I just never would have imagined....

I am not going to draw any grand conclusions from my experience. I don't know if these men should be in prison. I don't know if they received justice. I don't have a well informed understanding of our penal system. I am sure that aspects of prison life are very different from what I experienced in that room. But I can say this: During my visit to Sing Sing, it was this particular question of Jesus that I carried with me, somehow smuggled in through security. And that's a good thing, because I couldn't have left the question behind if I tried. Referring to a sinner before him, Jesus asked, "Do you see this woman?" That's the question that echoed in my ears as we met with the men in the class: "Do you see this man?" Can you clear away the stereotypes and the pre-conceived notions and the condemnations long enough to see this man? After all, the physical walls of the prison are not the only thing preventing you from

seeing these men.

As the time approached for the class to end, one of the students spoke up and said, "I'm sorry, Pastor Bonnie, but we have only fifteen minutes to go. I want to make sure we get our books signed before it's too late. Then, if we've got some time, we can come back to this discussion." And at that they all stood up and formed a kind of line. They all wanted their books signed.

So I signed each book, with the man's name and these words, "With every good wish and best blessing, Martin." And, unlike other times when I have signed books, after I finished writing in each book, I didn't remain seated. I stood up from the table to shake each man's hand. I wanted to be able to look each one in the eyes. I wanted, for once, as best as I could, to be able to answer Jesus' question: "Do you see this man?"