

If you ever want to get mixed advice about something ask people about forgiveness. One ancient Greek proverb says, "Know all and you will pardon all." But another ancient Greek proverb says, "To forgive everyone is as much cruelty as to forgive no one." Then there's this dualism I found at boardofwisdom.com, "If you aren't willing to forgive someone then you don't truly love them." Or, "How many times do we forgive someone just because we don't want to lose them, even though they don't deserve our forgiveness." (Anonymous)

Our gospel reading is about forgiveness, and though I don't know if Luke intended this or not when he wrote it, there is a very truthful dualism going on in it. The dualism is the difference between forgiveness from God and forgiveness from other people.

This story leaves us longing for much more information than it gives. And I'm afraid that people's minds have been putting information into this story for many centuries; so much information that origins of the story may be lost. Whenever I

read this story my mind immediately imagines a scene the way artists often depict it. They depict Simon as a wealthy man with a lavish city house and this meal with Jesus is actually a banquet where the other guests are also wealthy, powerful and righteous citizens. The unnamed woman is depicted as young, gorgeous and obviously seductive.

Yet these details are not in the story. If we want to more clearly see the dualism between forgiveness from God and forgiveness from other people I think we have to be willing to take out the details that aren't there.

We don't really know the nature of this woman's sins. Based on her lavish gesture toward Jesus with the perfume and wiping his feet with her hair we immediately make assumptions about the type of sinner that she is. But we really don't know. People often assume she is young and seductive, but the Bible just describes her as a female resident of the city who has been labeled a "sinner". She could just as easily be any age - perhaps even elderly - and actually quite likely she was disgusting looking. Perhaps the scene was more pathetic than seductive.

Simon too has many details added in. Maybe he was rich, the text doesn't say. All we know is that he owned a house in a city. Many people did that. And don't think of this city as a major metropolis. In those days most cities were smaller than our villages. These are tiny places. Everyone knew everyone else. Maybe this was a lavish banquet of other rich people. But all the text says is that it was a meal where Jesus, Simon, and some other unnamed people were present. We just don't know, and if you do construct this scene as if there were a great social and economic divide between Simon and this woman you may be making a mistake. Bringing them closer together can help us connect with the dualistic nature forgiveness can sometimes take.

I think many people have little trouble understanding God as forgiving. In texts like these we see Jesus forgiving people for their sins; unknown sins like this woman's or known sins like Peter denying Jesus on the night before the crucifixion. In church we often have a forgiveness of sins part of the service. We spend some time thinking about our broken and sinful nature, and then we hear God's words of forgiveness.

Perhaps this is a meaningful action to you. Perhaps it is just words and ritual. Maybe you feel relieved of guilt afterward and maybe you don't, but forgiveness of sins from God usually exists at a distant level. It is an intellectual or emotional exercise and doesn't have to affect your daily actions. But forgiveness from other people is another story.

Let's take, for example, a stay at home mom who has a gambling addiction. She's not a high stakes player but she's learned that she has a few hours a day by herself that she can use for internet gambling. She's figured out ways to cover up her losses so they don't show up in her family finances, and she's learned ways to keep her internet use secret from others. She's ashamed of what she does but she can't seem to break the addiction on her own. She comes to church every week, confesses to God what she's doing, prays for strength to break the addiction but all too often falls back into it. Even though she feels a bit guilty about exploiting God's forgiveness she knows it's always there. Plus, she tells herself she's not really hurting anyone.

But she has the public reputation of being an upstanding perfect stay at home mom who's got it all together. All the neighbors think she's perfect and flawless. She's too ashamed to admit to anyone that she has a problem. She's afraid that they will look down on her. They will label her. Everyone will see her and think, "She's got a gambling addiction. She's messed up."

The sad truth is that this woman is trapped in sin and shame. And along with that is the ugly truth that if she does share her problems with anyone she'll get a divided response. Indeed there will be a good number of people who will label her and look down on her. They'll judge and condemn her. They'll whisper and snicker behind her back. While they may treat her cordially in public they will hold a secret feeling that she is somehow tainted or dirty. These are people like Simon in our gospel reading.

Yet there will also be people who would gladly and warmly forgive her, support her, and think no less of her for her sins; perhaps even think more highly of her because of her flaws. Truly perfect people are so annoying.

My biggest complaint against Facebook is not people who share too much or who spend too much time on it. It is people when people use it to prop up their public facades. Sometimes when you glance through people's Facebook posts it feels like everyone else is having such a great life with great friends and great relationships and by comparison, well - perhaps not the best language, but - your life sucks.

When Jesus meets Simon in that meal we see God pushing people to make forgiveness real. And this is not forgiveness at the surface level, which is where we normally think of forgiveness. Normally when we think of forgiving someone we think of some wrong someone has done to us and we should accept their apologies or reconcile with them.

No, this is on a much deeper level. This is forgiveness where someone says, will you accept me for who I am, flaws and all? Will you refrain from labeling me, boxing me in, or thinking less of me as a human being because of who I am? Will you meet me on a level playing field where we are together or

will you see yourself forever standing on a higher level and looking down upon me?

That is the kind of forgiveness Jesus wanted to get out of Simon the Pharisee for this unnamed woman. They didn't have to become the best of friends. Jesus wasn't asking their families to start doing Fourth of July picnics together. Jesus wanted Simon to see himself as a sinner in need of God's grace, just like the woman. Jesus wanted Simon to be able to make an empathetic connection with her.

Confession and forgiveness as we do it in church is a great thing between you and God. If it eases your conscious and helps you to overcome your sins, great. But it is also meant to guide and empower you to forgive others around you at the level Jesus is asking from Simon. Perhaps the true power of corporate confession and forgiveness is that we do it together. We do it together because it puts all of us on a level playing field. May that forgiveness enable you to connect and embrace others as well. Amen