

The Sinner Label

Ken Wilson, 11.25.18

A given: Christianity claims we're all sinners. Super important to feel bad about being one, leverage that to get right with God. But today examine how Jesus cast suspicion on how we use this term against others/ourselves in a way has nothing to do with God

Engage in what our Jewish friends call **Midrash**—interpreting a text of sacred Scripture. You might have grown up with idea only one valid interpretation of a text and it's our job to arrive at it,

In Jewish tradition, sacred stories are alive—affect us all differently; must be many different interpretations. When a rabbi does Midrash, it's meant to stimulate thought not end it. No one gets to drop mic, have last word. Like **coding** for you software geeks—many ways to build a new app, some better than others, some will never work, but lots of good ways to get job done

Let's do us some Midrash! A story in Luke 7—before we read it set **context**: Jesus had gained a reputation as a sinner, mainly by the company he keeps. He complains he can't win for losing with some of the elder-sages: John Baptist lives in desert on a strict diet, and you say he has a demon. I enjoy a good party and you call me a wine-soaked glutton and a sinner...

Read ***Luke 7: 36–50***

THE SINNER LABEL IS SOMETHING TO QUESTION

[Greg Carey, *Sinners: Jesus and His Earliest Followers*]

Twice, woman is labeled, simply, sinner. No name, just a label. (By contrast, men [Jesus/Pharisee] are named—sign of woman's inferior status). People with less power more likely to be labeled rather than named. Labels used to dismiss people, control them. Women more easily labeled than men, minorities than majority, non-citizens than citizens.

Certain people got the label, but it's never defined. Tradition identifies woman with **Mary Magdalene**, who further identified as a **prostitute**. All that is tradition, not text.

Some see drying Jesus feet with her hair as a sexual gesture, but women also let their hair down as a sign of **mourning**, distress.

He's reclined at table, his feet would be behind him—she's weeping, wiping feet with tears, and kissing them; but significant action seems to be anointing his feet. Seems like she came to anoint his feet...in process, started weeping. Act of devotion. Simon's objection doesn't seem to be on grounds that the actions are in themselves inappropriate, but that Jesus should know better than to tolerate such a thing from a known sinner.

Sinner label signified something beyond a moral status...an indicator of **social deviance**—living outside of societal norms in some way. Within her small village, the woman was non-compliant in some way. In any group, people who don't go along to get along. That can get you labeled. **Jesus carried sinner label**, not just by his association with sinners, but also by rumors that he was born out of wedlock, Joseph wasn't his father. His birth, outside norms. This may be why Jesus sensitized to the effect of labeling.

We do label people, don't we? And we get labeled. Jesus way of relating to this woman makes us question all this—even when the labeling is “theologically justified” (yes, we all miss the mark, we have faults, we sin) but is this something we want to participate in, labeling people? Should we label others like this? Should we take on these labels when they are applied to us?

Telling detail: Simon sees woman, then it says, he “**said to himself**” — *This man, if he were a prophet, should have known what sort of woman this is, that she is a sinner.* That's Simon's **internal dialogue**.

We don't just label people with our spoken words. We label them with out **internal dialogue**, our thoughts. We see people labeled by others, and we internalize it... things like racism, homophobia, trans-phobia are infections of mind...sure, we can clean up our language ... But labeling goes deeper... It lodges inside us as internal reflexes [entering rotating shelter, see 25 people, 19 guests, 6 hosts—how do you tell them apart?]

LABELS KEEP US FROM SEEING PEOPLE

So this story is about **labeling**, but it's also about different ways of **seeing** the same person. We notice this when we live in close proximity with a person—suddenly our lens can shift. What should be a fleeting annoyance, lodges in us, triggers something in us and the friend becomes a fiend. It can last minutes, hours, days...

Get staging right here. Woman approaches Jesus from behind, so Simon is first to see her. As woman is anointing Jesus feet, Jesus is focused on Simon who is speaking... then Jesus continues to look at Simon as he gives the little story about creditors... then, finally he turns to look at the woman... the way the staging works highlights the seeing

“Then turning toward the woman, he said to Simon, ‘Do you see this woman? I entered your home, you didn’t give me water for my feet [customs of hospitality] but she, from the time I entered has not stopped kissing my feet. You didn’t anoint my head with oil, but she anointed my feet with ungent.’”

How we **see** people, how we **regard** them, is what matters most.

Conflict resolution institute, *Arbinger*: In business, focus on improving our people skills... to be more effective. But often the improved people skills are so much lipstick on a pig. Humans are sensitive to how we **regard** them, and how we regard a person leaks out around our people skills. No amount of niceness or people skills can cover up that fundamental regard.

That's what Jesus is getting after Simon for—not his people skills, but his regard, his way of seeing this woman.

The labeling blinds us to those we label, but it also conveniently blinds us to **ourselves**. Jesus saw her actions as a rebuke of Simon's inhospitality. Did Simon see that? Why not? Our labeling others makes us blind to our own stuff... that's the appeal of it... keeps us facing our own shadow side.

FORGIVENESS MIGHT FEEL WAY DIFFERENT WE IMAGINE

Complex, subtle, mysterious interaction: he's defending the woman from sinner labeling, and yet he pronounces forgiveness.

Could be interpreted many ways. Maybe Jesus has some superior knowledge of woman's sins Which he forgives. Doesn't feel like that to me. Feels like he's doing a ju-jitsu move on people judging her. She's carried this sinner label, maybe for a long time, the Scarlet S on her chest. She's in a social situation in which labeling from powerful people is intense and explicit. If I called someone out here in this space, pointed at you, and labeled you a sinner, feel reflexive shame, feel bad, maybe some actual things you've done would come to mind, maybe not... Public shaming stimulates a form of **social anxiety** [will this group turn on me?]

You feel extremely vulnerable, exposed, morally naked.

What I see happening is Jesus throwing a cover on this woman...and doing it in a way that takes heat off her and puts it on the labelers, the accusers. He seems, if anything, uninterested even dismissive of her sins, like he could care less whatever they are

Phrase "off the hook." I fished for a while, but it got to me. I didn't like to taste of the fish, but I liked catching, catch and release ...

So much forgiveness feels like that. Ever get an email from someone who went South on you, and out of the blue they write: "Just to let you know I've forgiven you." A dig. Some forgiveness is just plain creepy.

This is the opposite experience. Notice the tense: Not, "I now pronounce you forgiven!" ...you're your sins **have been** forgiven (have been both times). Have been...happened a while ago.

Blanket forgiveness, unrelated to confession or acknowledgement. If Jesus were training as a priest, he would flunk the sacrament of confession-absolution final. He's doing it all wrong, skipping steps.

In one brilliant act, she's hero, Simon is the goat. She's the rich lover and he's stingy lover. He's moved her in that socially hostile setting from place of the accused to the place of honor—she's the example of doing things right. He's flipped an occasion of public shaming into an occasion of public accolade.

But let's give kudos to woman... don't ya love how she doesn't give a flying ... a rat's ... a hoot? All that shaming is heaped on her, but she's not owning it, taking it in ... she could care less what Simon thinks of her... what Simon thinks of her reveals Simon, not her.

I don't know who I like better in this episode, Jesus or the woman? They are both such originals. You want to say, "Where did they come from? What are they in touch with? I want to be in touch with that." What they are in touch with is God.

REFLECTION

Visualization: light of Christ.