

The View From Where You're Sitting

She burst in, uninvited, her life the kind of chaotic mess that embarrassed nearly everyone who got close to her. There was a powerful man, from the ruling party, who thought she was a tramp—a careless, wanton profligate who flaunted her sins before proper society. If it were up to him, he'd make her pay, dearly. But it wasn't up to him.

She'd loved several men, but none of them really loved her. And now, she was alone, poor and crazy with guilt. She never planned to end up as a public spectacle whose life would redefine personal responsibility and the power of the ruling elite.

When Crystal Ferguson was arrested, in 1991, after testing positive for cocaine before undergoing an emergency caesarean section, South Carolina's then Attorney General defended her arrest as a victory for children's rights. A decade later, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that testing pregnant women for drugs without their knowledge and arresting them violated the Constitutional protection of the Fourth Amendment.

But a decade in the legal limelight did little to change Crystal Ferguson's life. She was still poor, though she worked a series of thankless, dead-end jobs, and struggled to care for her two children. A couple of weeks ago, in a Columbia trailer park, Crystal Ferguson died along with her youngest daughter, when somebody set their house on fire. Forty-five years of notorious sinning went up in smoke.

There are two ways of looking at Crystal. One way is to see an abusive, drug-addicted woman who cared so little for her children that she would pump cocaine from her veins into theirs. Another way is to see a loving mother, enslaved to a drug that nearly did her and her children in, but who somehow kept going, kept working, kept trying, against all the odds. There is always more than one way of seeing a person. It kind of depends on where you're sitting.

On a long ago Sabbath day afternoon, and Simon the Pharisee had invited everyone over to his house for a grand meal after synagogue. He was especially interested in having the traveling rabbi from Nazareth at his table. Maybe he could finally determine whether or not this Jesus was for real. Some people were saying he'd raised a widow's son from the dead a few days before. They thought he was a great prophet in the tradition of Moses and Elijah. But Simon, being a careful student of the Bible, and a man of renowned virtue, wasn't so sure. After all, there were rumors that Jesus actually partied with drunks and prostitutes and wasn't averse to tipping back a couple goblets of wine. Simon would find out by throwing his own party.

Just to see what this guy did; to see if he was the kind of rabbi that anyone who really loved God would follow. Because if Jesus denied the Biblical truth that keeping God's

Law was the key to righteousness, then he was no prophet, just another charlatan trying to rob the poor of what little they had.

The party started off well enough, the table piled high with food, and the servants made sure that everyone's wine glass stayed full. Simon asked Jesus what he thought about the resurrection of the dead and the coming of the Kingdom, and Jesus gave him answers rooted in the rabbinical traditions. They laughed at mutual jokes about the Saducees and the hapless and corrupt Herodians. It was turning out to be a lovely afternoon.

Then Simon saw her. She'd slipped in quietly, her eyes red and swollen, her face averted from anyone at the table. Her hair, long and full, fell across her shoulders and beads glittered around her wrists. Her clothes hinted at the forbidden flesh beneath. Simon started to say something, but then he thought, "Wait, here's the real test, if Jesus really is a prophet, he will throw this whore out."

But Jesus didn't even stop his commentary about Amos and Malachi and the coming of Elijah to make world right. Behind him the woman stood, silently weeping. She knelt suddenly, and Jesus' eyes darted towards her, but he went on talking. Simon couldn't help taking her in. She really was quite beautiful, in spite of her vileness.

As she leaned over Jesus' dirty feet, her sobs grew louder and her tears came in a torrent, dripping off her nose, splashing onto his toes and ankles. Simon shifted uncomfortably. As if she knew him well, the woman took Jesus' foot in her hand tenderly. She shook her long, dark hair and began to dab at the tiny circles of tear spots. "Surely he knows what kind of woman this is," thought Simon. "You don't even have to be a prophet to know what she does for a living." The servants stood back against the wall, trying their hardest to be invisible. The other guests grew silent, staring in unbelief. The woman took an alabaster jar of fine, perfumed oil out of her pocket and opened it. She slowly rubbed it into the rough skin of Jesus' feet. Simon's dining room filled with the scent of jasmine and roses.

Finally Jesus stopped. The only sound was the woman sobbing, sighing, kneading Jesus' calloused feet. "Simon, I need to tell you a story."

"Of course, Rabbi, pray tell."

"Once there was a moneylender who, like all moneylenders, had a couple of debtors who couldn't pay back their loans. One owed him \$5,000 and one owed \$500. But he was a good man, and figured that sometimes the cost of doing business means that you just forgive people's debts. So he called the two of them in and cancelled their notes. Which one of them do you think will love him more?"

Simon still can't get his eyes off the woman. Finally he turns to look at Jesus. "I suppose the one who owed him \$5000." From his perch at the head of the table, he smiled in a self-satisfied sort of way.

And Jesus, for the first time, turned around to look at the woman with his foot in her hand. She kissed his foot, her ruby lips gently quivering.

“Simon, do you see this woman? You know, when I got here, you did not even ask the servants to give me a basin of water so I could clean up my feet. But, look at her, she cleaned them with her tears and dried them with her hair. You might have thought I didn’t, but I did notice that you didn’t bother to give me the kiss of peace. Look at her, Simon, she’s kissed my feet. You didn’t give me any oil so I could get this mop of hair out of my eyes, but she’s massaged my feet with this lovely ointment from a far away land. I know what kind of life she’s lived, and she knows it too. But she also knows that she’s been forgiven and that’s why she’s so full of love. But I guess someone like you, who is so morally pure,” and Jesus turns to look Simon square in the eye, “someone like you doesn’t get forgiven very much, so you don’t love very much.”

And Jesus turned back to the woman sprawled beside him. He took her hand in his, and stroked her hair softly. His voice was gentle and kind. “Your sins are forgiven.” And she smiled an alabaster smile.

The guests and the servants looked at each other through the still, perfumed, afternoon air. They sucked in a great breath, in unison. “Who is this man who forgives sins?”

But they were all invisible to Jesus now. There was only him and the smiling woman with the long, dark hair. And he said to the woman, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.”

There is always more than one way of seeing a person. And it depends on where you’re sitting. If you’re David, sitting on a golden throne, you see yourself as the apple of God’s eye, entitled to any pleasure of your kingdom. But, if you’re Bathsheba, a lonely military wife sitting on a hot summer night in a rooftop tub, you might see David as a comforting lover, filling the empty nights with passion and excitement. And, if you’re Nathan, an angry prophet sitting in his prophet’s cave, you just might see David as an exploitive and selfish man, intent on taking what is not his and destroying whomever is in his way to get it.

If you’re Peter, one of the original twelve disciples, a called and faithful Israelite, you see yourself as protecting the Law of God, and preferring the company of people who have a covenant history. It’s not that you don’t think that God calls people of questionable background, you just think they ought to be a little more like you, even if it means being a lot less like who they are. But if you’re Paul, sitting at a table in Syria, having dinner with a group of Syrian friends, and there’s an empty chair where the called and faithful disciple was supposed to sit, you’d see that disciple as a faithless hypocrite, obsessed with keeping ancient useless religious customs at the expense of doling out divine grace. You might even see him as an enemy, whose righteousness is a lie.

And sitting where we are, how do we see the woman who slipped, uninvited, to caress and clean Jesus’ sore and dirty feet? If you’re sitting in Simon’s seat, you see the kind of

woman you don't invite to sit at dinner. But sitting at the other end of the table, Jesus can see her as forgiven and rapturous, so overcome with grace that she's lost all sense of public decorum.

Loving God is not the hard part of being a Christian. The hard part of being of Christian is seeing other people with Jesus' eyes. Seeing them as forgiven, as grace-full, as redeemed and holy even when they aren't living into their redemption. Where law-keeping righteousness sees a sinner, Jesus sees one of his own. Where purity is put off by promiscuity, grace sees only goodness. It all depends on where you sit.

The State of South Carolina sat on its judgment seat and saw Crystal Ferguson as a crack mom and her child as a crack baby. As Pickens County Judge Frank Eppes admonished at a sentencing hearing of another woman who admitted to using cocaine while pregnant:

You know, we've got enough trouble with normal children. Now this little baby's born with crack. When that baby is seven years old, they have an attention span that long. They can't run. They just run around in class like a little rat. Not just black ones. White ones too.

But it all depends on where you sitting. Because if you're not sitting high on a judge's bench, wrapped in your sacred black robes, you just might see that crack baby isn't running around at all like a little rat. In fact, you would see that the crack baby, Virginia Ferguson, is a fifteen-year old ROTC cadet at Columbia High School. From where she sat, on an old couch, in a run-down rental trailer, she didn't see her mother as a crack mother, but as someone who loved her, and inspired her to do better. You'd see the woman who worked hard, day and night, walking to work and back, caring for her children in a world that only saw her as a crack mom. Virginia Ferguson told a reporter this week how she saw her mother:

All you see is either homeless people or something. Nobody wants to try. She wasn't like that. She wanted to try.

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