

**Finding Human Dignity* - Meditation given at FPC, Bozeman,
after PresbyCat mission trip, March 2018
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Tanner is a member of FPC, Butte, and active until he moved to Bozeman. At Westminster Spires he was a camper then staff for several summers, was Yellowstone Presbytery's 2016 YAAD to General Assembly, and as a leader in PresbyCats, he headed up their very active service and "Rent-A-Cat" program and is now their President. After graduation Tanner will be getting his Ph.D. in Biomedical Engineering at the Univ. of Michigan.

I recently finished reading a book called *In the Shelter*, which was written by Pádraig Ó Tuama who is the spiritual leader of the Corrymeela Community in Northern Ireland, which is where the Presby Cats went on our mission trip two years ago. This book is described on the back panel as a "book of contemplation" that "relates ideas of shelter to journeys of life, opening up gentle ways of living well in a troubled world."

In this book, Pádraig Ó Tuama comments on a story in the gospel of Luke 7:36-50 where Jesus is eating dinner in the house of Simon, a Pharisee. You might remember that while they are eating, the bible describes a sinful or immoral woman who enters the house and weeps at Jesus' feet, wipes his feet with her hair and anoints his feet with expensive perfume.

In this part of the gospel, Luke is establishing Jesus as a *new* kind of prophet. Simon's role in this story is therefore to question whether Jesus is indeed some kind of prophet because surely a prophet would not associate with such a woman with such a reputation and such a bad name.

The story continues, but I want to skip ahead to a point where Jesus asks Simon a *seemingly simple* question,

"Simon, Do you see this woman?"

As Pádraig Ó Tuama writes,

"I think the answer is clear. I think the answer is 'No'. I think the answer is that Simon does not see her, but he sees everything he thinks he sees about her: what he imagines about her names."

And so the conclusion may be that Simon only sees the woman as her sin. He sees her in a singular box, and does not consider that she too is a person, an individual. And therefore, she is something less than human in his eyes. Yet Jesus sees her as a person. He sees her for everything that she is...for all her hopes, dreams, fears, and failures—He sees her for *Everything* that she is.

The Presby Cats recently went on a mission trip to Miami, Florida where we worked with four separate agencies working to serve the people of Miami. On our first work day, we worked at a kosher food bank where Jewish people who have fallen on hard times and who

adhere to kosher dietary restrictions may come and select food for themselves and their families. While we were there, I asked myself a very limiting question that had an answer that is similar to Simon's answer above,

“If I had no money for food and I followed kosher dietary restrictions, would I still follow these restrictions? Would it matter to me as long as I got food somehow?”

At the surface, this seems like a relatively reasonable question. But it contains a hidden and powerfully restrictive undertone. I had defined these people with a singular box—a box of need and of hunger. And since I put them in this box, it didn't make any sense that they were being picky enough to say that they wanted to follow their faith and eat only kosher food when it's often harder to get and more expensive.

See, the issue here is that I defined them in a singular fashion. I failed to consider them as people, as individuals with lives, with families, with hopes, fears, faith and dreams. I failed to consider their context. And in failing to see them as people, I fell into the same trap that Simon did when looking at the woman wiping Jesus' feet.

Later in the week, Presby Cats worked at Riverside House, a half-way house for people in the last 6-months of their prison sentence that helps them transition successfully back into every-day life. While we were working there, we repeatedly heard the people living there referred to as 'Clients'. And I asked myself another question,

“Why do they call these people clients and not prisoners?”

Maybe the answer is obvious to you, for a moment though, I'd encourage you to imagine that these people were referred to as prisoners. I would hazard to guess in that case, it would be substantially more difficult to find a job, to find housing, or even to reintegrate with family.

Why? Because they are being defined by a singular box again. And as a society, we often have issues with people that we label as prisoner or ex-convict. We take that label and use it to look at them as something less than a person. We use a singular box to define them, and in so doing, we fail to consider their context. And when we fail to see them as people, we take away some of their dignity as human beings

Each agency we volunteered with works with a different population of people in Miami who are looked down on, struggling, disenfranchised, and desperate. They are working to support people who are looked at by society as something less than human. They were and are lifting these people up. They are striving to help these people find the dignity and humanity that has been stripped from them. They are striving to help these people be seen as people—*just like Jesus sees each one of us.*

*Tanner prepared this version for our Presbytery, based on a longer version.