

## What the Body Knows

Luke 7:36—8:3

*Then turning toward the woman, he said to Simon, "Do you see this woman?" (Luke 7:44)*

A few years ago, a Harvard professor of divinity announced the discovery of an ancient Coptic papyrus fragment in which Jesus purportedly mentions his wife. The announcement led to widespread controversy and debate, not only among academics, but within the church. What intrigued me at the time was not the possible authenticity of the fragment (scholars eventually proved it a fake), but the vehemence with which many Christians responded to its existence.

"Jesus wasn't married!" was the answer I routinely got when I mentioned the announcement. "He *couldn't* have been married! He was divine!" In other words, Jesus was human, but, well, not *that* human. He couldn't be *that* human and still be holy, antiseptic, immaculate. Heaven forbid that the Son of God might have been so embodied. So sensual.

In her book, *An Altar in the World*, Barbara Brown Taylor tells a related story about visiting a beautiful old church in Alabama.<sup>1</sup> Having arrived for the service too early, she stood for a while in front of the altar, admiring a mural of Jesus emerging from his tomb. Though the painting was impressive, Taylor felt that something was off. After gazing at the mural for several seconds, she realized what was missing: Jesus had no body hair. Without thinking, she shared her realization with a parishioner, a polite, well-put-together woman with expensive clothes and a flawless manicure. "He has the arms of a six year old. His chest is as smooth as a peach." The parishioner's smile froze, and she stared at Taylor in abject horror. "I can't believe you're saying this to me," she said without moving her red lips. "I just can't believe you're saying this to me."

1. Taylor, *An Altar in the World*, 36–37.

Christians, Taylor concludes, often find themselves “in the peculiar position of being followers of the Word Made Flesh who neglect our own flesh or worse—who treat our bodies with shame and scorn.” Or again: “Here we sit,” says Taylor, “with our souls tucked away in this marvelous luggage, mostly insensible to the ways in which every spiritual practice begins with the body.”<sup>2</sup>

The story of Jesus’s encounter with the woman in Simon’s house confronts our shame head-on. No matter how hard we try to theologize or intellectualize it away, the story is naked-making. It exposes, it confronts, it directs our gaze. It’s a story about the body. What the body is. What the body knows.

Feet. Tears. Perfume. Hair. All four Gospels tell it, the scandalous story of a woman who dares to love Jesus in the flesh—to love his spirit and his body with her own. Each writer frames the story differently to suit his own thematic and theological concerns, but that hardly matters; the story at its core remains the most sensual and shocking one in the New Testament.

In Luke’s version, the story is set early in Jesus’s ministry at the home of a Pharisee named Simon. No doubt curious about the young rabbi garnering both praise and outrage in the surrounding villages, Simon invites Jesus to a dinner party. After all, why *not* check out the would-be prophet from Nazareth? Perhaps he’ll have some fascinating things to say about religion. Maybe he’ll impress the other dinner guests with a nifty miracle or two—wouldn’t that be a credit to Simon? If nothing else, Jesus’s presence might make for some interesting chit-chat around the table and some delicious gossip afterwards.

So the invitation is extended and accepted. The guests arrive on the appointed evening, and as they recline around an impressively laden table, Simon settles in for a few hours of good food and lively conversation.

Enter the woman with the alabaster jar. In Luke’s account, the woman is unnamed and unwelcome: “a woman in the city, who was a sinner” (Luke 7:37). How exactly she crashes the party, we don’t know, but she manages to get in the door, approach the table, kneel quietly behind Jesus, and let down her hair.

Then, while God-knows-what transpires between the dinner guests, the woman bends over Jesus and begins to cry. She soaks Jesus’s feet with her tears, caresses them with her hair, bends to kiss his soles, his toes, and his ankles, and finally breaks open her alabaster jar to anoint his salty skin with a costly perfume. As far as we know, Jesus doesn’t say a word. Neither does the woman. But they communicate volumes.

2. Taylor, *An Altar in the World*, 40–41.

Can you imagine the scene? I wonder if the conversation around the table falters as the woman begins to cry. I wonder if the temperature rises a few significant degrees, and everyone in the room reaches simultaneously for the water jug. I wonder where the men look—or don't look—as the woman wraps Jesus's feet in her lustrous hair. I wonder if Jesus (never one to make things easy for the etiquette-obsessed) captures Simon's gaze and holds it, extending the discomfort, forcing his host to endure every searing kiss that grazes Jesus's skin.

The temptation here is to deflect. To minimize: "Perhaps it wasn't such a big deal in the first century. I'm sure people in that culture were more demonstrative than we are today. Showing affection like that was probably normal back then."

No. No, it wasn't. The Gospel writer takes pains to describe just how scandalous and unseemly the woman's behavior is in Jesus's own time and place. Simon is nothing less than disgusted, not only with the woman, but with Jesus, who tolerates her. Specifically, it's the woman's touch that makes Simon squirm with indignation: "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is *touching* him—that she is a sinner" (v. 39).

Luke sets the woman's story in the theological context of sin and forgiveness. Those who are forgiven little, Jesus says, love little, but those who are forgiven much, love lavishly. Simon's love is thin in this story because he doesn't recognize his need for grace. The woman, in contrast, knows the extent of her sin and the wide embrace of Jesus's forgiveness, so her love is boundless. This is an important lesson, and Jesus teaches it beautifully.

But what interests me more about this story is how much it conveys *without* language. What happens between Jesus and the weeping woman happens skin to skin. The woman never says, "I need you," or "Thank you so much," or "I love you." Her contrition, her worship, her yearning, and her love are enacted wholly through her body, and Jesus receives them into his own body with gratitude, love, tenderness, and pleasure. The holy sacraments here are skin, salt, sweat, and tears. The instruments of worship are perfumed feet and ardent kisses. This is not a polite piety of the mind; this is physical extravagance. What writer Mary Gordon calls, "A Sabbath of the skin."<sup>3</sup>

Meanwhile Simon, the religious expert? Simon misses the encounter entirely. Unable to recognize what only the body can know, Simon fails to see the sacred transformation happening at his own table. Notice what Jesus asks him: "Simon, do you see this woman?" (v. 44). It's a lacerating

3. Gordon, *Reading Jesus*, 37.

question. Because no, Simon doesn't see her. He doesn't see her humanity, her generosity, her capacity for deep and embodied love. Neither, in fact, does he see *Jesus's* humanity—his dusty feet in need of cool water, the sun-baked skin in need of fragrant ointment, the ever-giving, ever-sacrificing Messiah in need of reciprocity, affection, and loving touch. Though he accuses Jesus of ignorance, Simon is the one who is both blind and ignorant in this story. In his eyes, Jesus needs to remain a curiosity, an idea, an abstraction—and one can't love an abstraction.

In fact, Simon needs Jesus to remain "a prophet," and the woman to remain "a sinner." His own identity depends on every other identity at his table remaining fixed. But this is exactly what the woman unhinges when her body enters the room. With her hair, her tears, and her touch, she forces each guest back into his own skin. With her more perfect, more radical, and more offensive hospitality—a hospitality that breaks through cultural barriers, a hospitality attentive to mind, soul, and body—she confronts everyone in the room with their common humanity. *Do you see this woman?* The weeper? The washer? The anointer? She's the one who sees and knows. She's a prophet, too.

There is a cost to seeing. A cost to seeing Jesus's body. A cost to seeing my own. I, too, inhabit a culture that treats bodies with scorn. Most of the time, I see my body as something to shrink, starve, conquer, or tame. I see its flaws more clearly than I see its God-ordained dignity and beauty. Rarely do I see it as a vehicle for worship, love, hospitality, and grace. But if I can't see my own body as God's temple, if I won't embrace it as pleasing and delightful to its Creator, how will I ever see or embrace yours?

We are people of the Incarnation, called to look, to see, to break bread, share wine, and wash feet. Can we learn to see our embodied lives, our sensory lives, as fully implicated in our lives with God? Can we move past contempt, squeamishness, and fear, and offer God the Sabbath of our skin?