



# Meeting Jesus at the Table

## Week 3: The Words We Use

Heather Blair - 03/12/2023

Good morning. In case we haven't met, my name is Heather. It's a fine name, one I was okay with until the 80's—there was a lot of Heather activity in the pop culture of the 80's, so it soured me a little. But, all in all it's mine. My mom tells me she chose my name because she wanted me to have one that people couldn't make a nickname out of. Her name is Marjorie and so she was Marge or Margie and she kinda hated all of them. So she picked Heather because people couldn't shorten it. I mean, where there's a will there's a way. But she tried to give me a name to like more than she did hers.

It's a whole thing in my little family to have issues with your name. My dad was born Leroy Terry Smith. He hated Leroy so much that he went by Terry. But he still didn't like that, so when he turned 21 he went through the process of officially changing his name. He got rid of Leroy and Smith altogether. Took on his stepdad's last name—and he and my mom picked out his new first name from the whole wide world of possibilities. And, voila! My dad became Jon Terry Blair. I always loved that he did that. I mean who besides movie stars just gives themselves a whole new name? Let's not quibble about the fact that he could have chosen A N Y T H I N G and he picked Jon. It is at least Jon with no H, so points for style.

The words we use to identify ourselves are powerful. Names for sure. But also words like son, daughter, spouse, friend, enemy. White, black, Hispanic/Latinx, Asian. Male, female, non-binary. Employed. Unemployed. Self-employed. And not just the words on job applications, there are also words like Leader. Follower. Rich. Poor. Young. Old. Failure. Success. There are ones that are a little more tender. Pretty. Ugly. Skinny. Fat. Smart. Slow. Loud. Quiet. Stoic. Sensitive. Pragmatic. Flaky. Passive. Aggressive. There are words that might come with or from trauma: criminal. Victim. Abuser. Abused. Too much. Not enough.

Some of these identifying words we get to choose for ourselves, but a lot of them come from outside of us. They're age-old categories and they just get stamped on us. Some we do earn with our behavior—good and bad. And some people just thrust on us because that's a thing we humans do. We put labels on each other because it feels like it helps us make sense of the world. Even if who gets which stamp is subjective.

So, what happens when the words used to identify us don't seem to fit? Because we've grown and changed, or because they were improperly applied in the first place. Do you have any words in your life like that? Words that haunt you or squash you. Words that have scarred you. Words that make you want to wear a sign on your forehead that says "I AM NOT THIS"—or at least "I AM NOT ONLY THIS, THERE IS MORE TO THE STORY."

Once you get one of these identifiers, it can be hard to shake. My dad had to go to court to change his name, but that was just the start of it. For it to really take, he actually had to move away from home. No one from his old life (besides my mom) could get the hang of calling him by his new name. To this day, fifty years later and after his death, there are people who still call him Terry. And part of me gets it—that's how

they knew him, but also, he wanted to be called Jon. Hard to adjust, maybe, but doable.

But how much harder is it to change an identifier like damaged or failure or broken or shameful? Especially if these are names we call ourselves.

For Lent we are talking about the stories of Jesus' time on earth—especially at tables. And the underlying theme of all these stories is Jesus' radical inclusiveness—declaring an open table for all people, no matter what identifying words we're carrying around. The first week we talked about the miracle of the loaves and fish—about how Jesus made a table out of the whole earth, and fed all the people who pulled up a chair. Take that if you think any table is too small or too exclusive he says. Last week we talked about Jesus having a meal with Matthew. A tax collector. A proper villain. To use a couple of his identifiers. I don't care, Jesus says. We're having a meal—and then we're going to have a lot more. So, he's digging in to say, no, I mean it. Everyone is welcome. Not just passively welcome, everyone is invited to be with me. EVERYONE. Regardless of our past or current identities.

In today's story, we see that inclusiveness again. But this time Jesus more directly goes to work on our notions of these sticky names we come up with in the first place. It's a dangerous habit—for ourselves and others. It makes us to divide ourselves up by them. And it makes us vulnerable to try to exclude the people Jesus has included. Which seems like a pretty bad idea, yeah?

This story also gives us a real life example of someone who shakes off old identifying words that don't fit her any more, and who embraces fully the words that Jesus says identify her. And in her story, we can find some pointers on how we might do the same.

Let's look. I'm going to be reading Luke 7:36-50 from the CEB, you can follow along on the screen...

**<sup>36</sup> One of the Pharisees invited Jesus to eat with him. After [Jesus] entered the Pharisee's home, he took his place at the table. <sup>37</sup> Meanwhile, a woman from the city, a sinner, discovered that Jesus was dining in the Pharisee's house. She brought perfumed oil in a vase made of alabaster. <sup>38</sup> Standing behind him at his feet and crying, she began to wet his feet with her tears. She wiped them with her hair, kissed them, and poured the oil on them. <sup>39</sup> When the Pharisee who had invited Jesus saw what was happening, he said to himself, If this man were a prophet, he would know what kind of woman is touching him. He would know that she is a sinner.**

**<sup>40</sup> Jesus replied, "Simon, I have something to say to you."**

**"Teacher, speak," he said.**

**<sup>41</sup> "A certain lender had two debtors. One owed enough money to pay five hundred people for a day's work. The other owed enough money for fifty. <sup>42</sup> When they couldn't pay, the lender forgave the debts of them both. Which of them will love him more?"**

**<sup>43</sup> Simon replied, "I suppose the one who had the largest debt canceled."**

**Jesus said, "You have judged correctly."**

**<sup>44</sup> Jesus turned to the woman and said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? When I entered your home, you didn't give me water for my feet, but she wet my feet with tears and wiped them with her hair. <sup>45</sup> You didn't greet me with a kiss, but she hasn't stopped kissing my feet since I came in. <sup>46</sup> You didn't**

**anoint my head with oil, but she has poured perfumed oil on my feet. <sup>47</sup> This is why I tell you that her many sins have been forgiven; so she has shown great love. The one who is forgiven little loves little.”**

**<sup>48</sup> Then Jesus said to her, “Your sins are forgiven.”**

**<sup>49</sup> The other table guests began to say among themselves, “Who is this person that even forgives sins?”**

**<sup>50</sup> Jesus said to the woman, “Your faith has saved you. Go in peace.”**

Before we come to this evening in Luke, Jesus has been traveling around. Being himself. And causing the Hubub that that always seems to cause. In Chapter 7 alone, Jesus has healed the son of a Roman centurion (and Romans are the ENEMIES of the Jewish people of the time). He has raised a widow's son from the dead. Which really gets the tongues to wagging. Gets people wondering who he is—how to make sense of him. What words identify him? Prophet? Trickster? Even John the Baptist wonders what to call him. Maybe Messiah?

So, Jesus has got the Jewish leaders nervous. He's drawing big crowds, he's performing miracles. He's doing things only God should be able to do. Who does this Jesus think he is? So, at the start of our story a Jewish leader called a Pharisee invites Jesus over for a meal. And as Jesus is about tables, he's a yes for the invitation. Even though it's likely the Pharisee's invitation is a bit of a trap, Jesus goes.

Meals hosted by the Jewish leaders of the day were actually somewhat of an open invitation—in a sort of passive way. Anyone could come in to have some food—but only invited guests sat at the table and were part of the conversation. So, even though the doors were open—there were definitely insiders and outsiders. The honored and the tolerated.

The honored sat at low tables and reclined against them with their feet out behind them.

Feet were a kind of taboo part of the body then—in that they were a sandal-wearing people in the dusty desert. So, feet were always seen as dirty. Feet were the territory of servants and belonged far away from the table.

Into this scene walks a woman—which is an acceptable activity til they see who she is. And though we don't hear her name or anything else identifying about her, Luke helpfully calls her a sinner. It seems likely that everyone in the room thinks of her that way. The whole community probably. The whole community minus one—but let me not skip ahead.

Some of what the woman proceeds to do isn't completely unheard of, but it's pretty weird. People wash the feet of others—but not usually right at the table. And not usually with tears. People use perfumed oil to do anointings—pronouncements of blessing—but usually on the head, not the feet. Here's the real whopper that makes the record scratch and freezes the frame though—she lets down her hair to dry Jesus' feet. No no no no no. Women do not do that. It's pretty much one degree less scandalous than her stripping naked. So, if they weren't calling her sinner before—they sure are now.

And in one swift moment Jesus fails all of the Simon the Pharisee's tests. Confirmed he thinks. This man is no prophet—no special man of God. Even though Simon hasn't uttered his conclusions out loud, Jesus has a response. A bit of a test of his own. About forgiveness of debts. And though Simon gets the pop quiz answer right, you can tell he does so grudgingly. He doesn't absorb the challenge or invitation Jesus offers him.

But the woman has, so he gives her a new identifier—she is no longer sinner, she is “a woman who loves much.” An identity so deep and true that we still talk about her today. Even though we never get her name.

I don’t hate that along the way he points out a few of Simon’s own sins. Because indeed, failing to show proper hospitality is considered a sin in the ancient near east. It’s the sin that gets Sodom and Gomorrah toppled. Feel free to look it up.

Jesus pronounces the woman forgiven—because she has sought forgiveness with her actions if not her words. Jesus offers no such pronouncement to Simon—not because Simon isn’t worthy of forgiveness. The table is open even to him. But Simon doesn’t seem to see any need for forgiveness. His self-identifier Pharisee is too big and too loud. They are the keepers of the Law. The ones who theoretically excel at doing the dos and don’t-ing the don’ts.

We see the identifiers at work here, right? Pharisee. Woman. Sinner. Prophet. One who loves much. We see these identifiers being used to squash and to free. To insult and to affirm. To include and exclude. And we see that in the woman’s acknowledgment of her sinful identity she is freed from it, whereas Simon’s denial puts him in chains. So, how do we handle these identifying words—these ways of knowing and showing who we are—more like the woman who loves much and less like Simon who loves little?

We start with being forgiven. And it seems like in this case, more is more. So, haul it all out. Even if the scars that identifying words have made on you are not your fault—everything has to start with having our own sins forgiven. The ones we can articulate. The ones we can’t. The ones that are deep dark secrets. The ones that everyone knows and talks about. All of them. Why? Because we’re too terrible for Jesus otherwise? I don’t think so. His love is way bigger than that. It starts

with forgiveness for our sakes. So we can let that stuff go. So we won't obsess over trying to keep it hidden. So we won't get consumed with shame over failure. So we'll stop grading ourselves on a curve—at least I'm not as bad as... We don't forget about the things we've done, the ways we've fallen short or hurt others—but once we're forgiven someone else bears the weight of them. And we are freed up to be who we are when we aren't consumed with image management—convincing ourselves and others that we aren't so bad. And standing on top of whoever we need to to do it. No, we pull and Elsa and just let it go. Every bit that we can. We'll probably be works in progress.

We start with being forgiven and then we move in to being at that table with Jesus. Jesus whose very presence works like salt to bring out the true flavors of who we are. We let Jesus and our experiences of togetherness with Jesus determine our identifying words—not random people around us.

When the woman walks in the room the identifying word that seems to pop into everyone's mind is "sinner." But that doesn't give her even the slightest pause. Because she's already been forgiven. We don't know how or where, but she has to have been forgiven—because Jesus says that her acts of great love are her RESPONSE to forgiveness. So the forgiveness has had to come before she gets to the table. Jesus may say it out loud afterwards—but she is already the woman who loves much, no matter what the people around her try to call her.

In this story it's other people who call her the old, shameful name. And, that certainly happens to us. But way more often it's the names we call ourselves that are doing the real damage. Stupid, lazy, useless, failure, cheater, selfish, ugly, broken, crazy, invisible, unacceptable, unlovable or and sometimes we swing wildly to superior, holier, cooler, more evolved. I don't know what your words are—but they can all eat away

at us when they don't really fit. Jesus says, if you come here to the table with me, if you embrace my forgiveness then every word you have to identify yourself has to go through the filter of grace. If grace doesn't permit it through, then it is not your identity. And if grace does permit it through, then nobody ever should have the power to shame you for it. This work on who we are happens between each of us individually and Jesus/God/the Holy Spirit. People can give support, can encourage and help you explore—but they don't get to make any declarations about your identity.

How do we handle these identifying words swirling around us? We start with embracing forgiveness, we move through the filter of grace so that our true identity is revealed by what we and God experience together—we aren't subject to the shallow judgments of others. And then we turn and offer those things to the people around us. Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. Release others from our shallow judgments about their identifying words as we are released from theirs. These things have to be reciprocal.

If you keep up an unmerciful critique of others with the names you give them, you'll never really be able to believe that those names aren't also stuck to you. If you keep up an unmerciful critique of yourself, you'll never truly be able to offer grace to others. Grace is for all of us or it's for none of us.

Why all this talk about names and identifying words in the middle of this series about meeting Jesus at the table? Because it's these identifying words that can become the blockade to the open table. I cannot really approach because I am all the things my inner critic tells me I am. You can't approach because you are all these things that my outer critic says you are. I know the kinds of people God accepts and you ain't it, and I'm afraid I ain't it either—but I will cover that up with

self-righteousness and bravado. If I keep you out, you won't be able to see that I'm not there either.

But Jesus isn't having it. Where we see sinners, he sees people who have the potential to love much—whether that's in traffic, on the news or in the mirror. Lent reminds us that we are people who have been forgiven much if we'll accept it. It reminds us that forgiveness only stays alive if we keep it moving. It reminds us that we are all on equal footing—sorting out the names we want to change and the ones we want to keep. And it frees us from the tyranny of deciding that for each other. We will never be given the role of deciding who is excluded. Because there aren't any—there may be people who don't accept the invitation, but the table is set. And we will experience its full transformative power by having the courage to approach ourselves, and by offering encouragement to approach to everyone else. No matter what our names are.