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It was not enough to say that John F. Kennedy was Catholic. It had to be added that he would obey Rome rather than do the will of the American people. It was not enough to say that Martin Luther King Jr. wished to overturn the racial injustice of the south. It had to be added that he was a Communist. It was not enough to admit that Dan Quayle could not spell potato. It had to be added that he was not bright enough to be a heartbeat away from the presidency. Political parties perfected the art of labeling.

Once political parties perfected this art, the religious right learned from the best in the business and started creating its own vocabulary of spite: “liberal,” “soft on crime,” “leftist,” “socialist,” “tree hugger,” “bleeding heart,” “tax-and-spend”—you know the list. I’m not suggesting that there are no concerns about those who bear these labels. I’m suggesting that the labels are conversation stoppers. Like the old children’s game pin the tail on the donkey, once the donkey is properly pinned, the game is won. If the enemy can be properly labeled or mislabeled, the verdict for destruction is in place. Ready, aim, fire! What follows is not an intelligent, fact-informed, theologically guided discussion on important issues, but a lynching.

This is not new. They called Jesus a friend of sinners, a glutton, and a drunkard. They called him a blasphemer. They suggested that he was somehow a threat to Rome and that anyone who looked the other way would be “no friend of Caesar’s.” Few of these “labelers” ever had a sit-down face-to-face with Jesus. They just knew he was dangerous. They were right. If his understanding of the world were to prevail, it would turn the world as they knew it upside down.

This is exactly what happened to a visiting woman in Simon's home. The story is recorded in Luke 7:36-50. It is a story ripe with labels. "Sinner" was her label. And it stuck. She might as well have monogrammed her clothes in bright scarlet letters: S-I-N-N-E-R. We are not told whether she was a prostitute, but we suspect it from the way she is spoken about. The label "sinner" separated her from most folks in the community, except the lustful men who wandered into her isolation. They were gone almost as quickly as they came, always taking, never leaving anything behind. If she was the common prostitute of the day, she'd tie up her hair, put a vial of seductive perfume around her neck, and work the streets. People knew what she did.

Simon had a label too. "Host" was his. He was the backbone of the religious community, one who had taken his stance against the pagan culture of Rome. He preferred the way of Torah. We do too. He attended the Promise Keepers rally and defended the integrity of the family. He prayed. He fasted. He tithed. He believed that holiness was the practice of separating from evil of every shape and size. In addition to the label "host," he also wore the label "holy."

Our story is ripe for the perfect clash. The woman enters the home uninvited and approaches Jesus as he reclines on a couch, propped up on his elbow facing Simon. His feet dangle off the end of the couch behind him. The woman stands behind Jesus, wetting his feet with her tears. She loosens her hair, drying the tears with it, and kisses his feet. She splashes perfumed ointment into her hands and begins to massage his feet.

The geography of the room is very important. The woman is behind Jesus, massaging his dangling feet. Jesus faces Simon, who reclines on the couch in front of him. Jesus is sandwiched between *holy host* and *sinner*.

What label will Jesus wear in this story? Until this moment, Luke has introduced Jesus to us as "prophet." But the label is about to be rescinded by Simon. He says of Jesus, "*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, emphasis added). In other words, Jesus should be able to discern that the foot massage he is getting in Simon's home is not an act of hospitality but a seductive move by a sinful woman. *Prophets* know these things, especially the difference between the holy and the profane.

Before Simon can move to relabel Jesus “not-a-prophet,” Jesus speaks. Notice that the woman is still behind Jesus and that Jesus is still facing Simon.

Jesus spoke up and said to him, “Simon, I have something to say to you.” . . . “A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he canceled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?” Simon answered, “I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt.” And Jesus said to him, “You have judged rightly” (*vv. 40-43*).

The story suggests that love is empowered by forgiveness. The more deeply we experience forgiveness, the more deeply we love. Jesus interpreted the action of the woman as a response to forgiveness. The tears, the oil, the massage—all have nothing but forgiven gratitude in them. And how did Jesus know this? Well, *prophets* know these things.

Jesus knows the difference between heartfelt worship and dull routine. He knows the difference between obedience and showing off. He knows the difference between a sacrificial gift and a religious tip. He knows the difference between a glittering image and a pure heart. And he doesn’t even have to turn around and look. The woman from the story experienced the cancellation of a huge debt and it changed her. Then comes the hinge of the story. Notice again the geography of the room. Jesus swivels. Just as he spoke of the woman to Simon while his back was to her, he now speaks of Simon to the woman with his back toward Simon.

Then turning toward the woman, he said to Simon, “Do you see this woman? [Jesus is looking straight at her, inviting Simon to do the same.] I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.” Then he said to her, “Your sins are forgiven.” But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, “Who is this who even forgives sins?” And he said to the woman, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace” (*vv. 44-50*).

Jesus, the *prophet*, now tells what was in Simon’s heart without looking. And he declares to the woman that she is forgiven. Labels fly. “Sin-

ner” becomes “forgiven one” and “the one who loves most.” At the same time, “holy host” becomes “little forgiven/little love.” The world in Simon’s home is being turned upside down. This cannot be. So they move to relabel Jesus by asking the question, “Who is this who even forgives sin?” Because if this holy conversation goes further, the woman becomes their sister in the kingdom and they will be forced to deal with her on new terms. It’s easier to keep the old labels intact.

It seems to me that somewhere in the world, there should be people who are doing what Jesus did in this story—naming forgiveness and empowering a new identity. As long as conversations occur under the old labels, no one ever changes. As long as we talk about people without ever looking at them, never addressing them, we will be like Simon.

This ploy diverts the conversation from the issue at hand to the persons dealing with the issue. It seeks to tag a person with a label that is dismissive. Rather than a partner in conversation, one becomes a person judged and dismissed as unworthy of consideration. Avoidance is then practiced and conversation never occurs.

If the holy conversation, a generous discourse, is to occur, the labeling must cease. We are not dealing with labels, we are talking to people. Forget their political party and economic status, that they beat you in the last board election, that they are different—and remember that Jesus removes labels. So can we. Then we might be able to talk.