

# Cleaning Up Before The Maid Comes

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Dr. Lauren Winner in her intriguing book *Girl Meets God*, which I quoted just a couple weeks ago, chronicles her journey as a young woman from devout Judaism to Christianity – and in it she tells the story of the time when she was preparing to meet with a pastor to share her confession. She had been through a long private season with God in which she laid before God all that she knew to be the sin in her life ... at one point she spent three days praying, as she writes, “with her eyes open and a legal pad in hand, asking God to call to mind all the sins I needed to repent.” So with legal pad in hand she made her way to see her confessor – this pastor whom she trusted. She believed that for her this was a next step toward experiencing the cleansing grace of God. But as she drew near to this intense moment of actually confessing her sin before another human being – she began to imagine in her own mind all the sins from her list that she might leave off. Things she would be mortified for any human to hear. Things that if anybody heard them why they would run out the door screaming. And in thinking of these sins that she wanted to leave off her list it brought to mind the time when she had hired someone to come clean her apartment. She hadn’t cleaned her apartment in months (“dust bunnies,” she writes, “had morphed into dust mastodons. The kitchen floor was sticky with jam and brown with dried coffee”) ... but she was having a dinner party and needed it cleaned quickly so she hired a maid to come clean. And as she anticipated the maid coming and as she looked closely at how much a wreck her apartment was ... she felt the urge that had been instilled in her by her mother which was to clean before the maid comes. To clean before

the maid comes. This is what came to mind for Dr. Winner as she prepared to confess her sins – maybe a little tidying up of my life to make it look not so bad before I let anyone else see it.

To clean before the maid comes.

It would appear in our story this morning – this story about Jesus at the home of a Pharisee named Simon (Matthew and Mark call him Simon the Leper) – it would appear that one of the attendees at dinner, a woman from the city, had not cleaned before the maid came. Everyone seems to know about this woman. At least to know enough about her to call her a sinner. Luke calls her a sinner ... the Pharisee calls her a sinner ... and even Jesus says that her sins are many. We can only imagine what that might mean – was she a prostitute? Was she an adulteress? Was she a cheater, a liar, a stealer? Was she a gossip? Who knows what she was ... but everybody in this story is agreed ... she is a sinner. And she doesn't seem to have been able to clean before the maid comes. Her life is an open legal pad. Some of the pages have fallen into the hands of the townsfolk ... some of the pages have fallen into the hands of the Pharisee ... and it would appear that all the pages have fallen into the hands of Jesus.

Can you imagine this? All your pages handed out to anyone who is curious? Can you imagine a story being told about you and the only thing they can think to call you is not your name ... but just simply a sinner? "Hey, I'd like to introduce you to ... sinner."

But there she is and she is anointing and cleansing Jesus. Anointing him with her precious ointment ... and cleansing him with her tears. She is literally pouring herself out to him ... pouring out her precious ointment ... and pouring out her tears. She's handing over all the pages. No tidying up going on here. What you see is what you get.

Now the Pharisee who holds only part of the pages ... is somewhat disgusted not only with the woman ... but with Jesus. "What's going on here?" he says. "Doesn't Jesus know how bad she is?"

And of course that's the point isn't it? Jesus knows the whole story. He has the whole legal pad. She did not clean up before he came. She doesn't have dust bunnies ... she has sin

mastodons. But the thing that Jesus sees that nobody else seems to be able to see is that this woman ... this sinner ... is -- what we would call her today -- the identified patient.

The identified patient in family therapy is the person in a dysfunctional family that everyone points to as having a problem. Now the whole family, because it is a dysfunctional family, has got problems, problems they don't want anyone knowing about -- but it is the identified patient -- the one family member who everyone points to and says, "She needs help." And one of the reasons why everyone points to her ... is that it keeps the attention away from them. Boy, if she gets fixed up, just think how good it will be for the rest of us.

So in the house of Simon the Leper -- and back then leprosy had its own moral mark -- in the house of Simon the Leper it works really well to point to the identified patient and call her a sinner.

You see the truth is -- we are the most unkind when we are focused not on our own sin -- but on the sin of someone else. We are the most unkind when we are focused not on our own sin -- but on the sin of someone else.

Several years ago I told you the story about a girl where I grew up whom I will call Julie Johnson. Julie Johnson had cooties. She had a severe case of the cooties. No one knows quite how she got them. But someone somewhere along the way at Gordon Elementary school diagnosed that Julie Johnson had cooties. It's because, of course, Julie didn't look quite right. She was a little overweight. She walked sort of funny. She had a loud voice. She was socially awkward. Well that's about all you need for a diagnosis of cooties. And because this was long before the HIPPA requirements -- everyone knew that Julie had this American elementary school equivalent of leprosy. And so the word was that Julie Johnson was so badly infected -- that not only were you not to go near her -- you were not supposed to touch the ground anywhere near where she walked. So every morning on the Gordon Elementary playground whenever anyone saw Julie approaching the playground they would start to yell in a sort of chant-like cadence: John -- son, John -- son. And as soon as you heard someone yell John-son ... you were supposed to start yelling it too. And not only that, you were supposed to jump onto some piece of playground equipment so as to get your feet

off the ground when Julie Johnson walked by. And that's what we did every morning at Gordon Elementary. "John-son, John-son" as Julie Johnson with head bowed low ... would walk through our playground on her way to class. Everyone of us ... on top of the jungle gym, the slide, the swing-set, the chin-up bars ... all of us escaping the infection of Julie Johnson.

We are most unkind, aren't we, when we are focused on someone else as the identified patient. And we focus, of course, on the identified patient – the leprosy, the cooties, the sins of the other – because of course we think we've managed to clean ourselves up just enough to make people think that somehow, someday – we've got our act a little bit more put together.

So to Simon the Leper, Jesus says, "You know, the kindest person in this room turned out not to be the host. 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 (i.e. the one whose managed to tidy up a bit before the maid comes, i.e. the one who doesn't imagine that he or she has that messy a house, i.e. the one who can't imagine having that much of a problem) this is the one who loves little.

You see the kindness that Paul speaks of as one of his fruit of the Spirit is not born out of some type of moral development – that is to say, I am kind because I have become a better person. No, kindness comes when we have identified ourselves as the patient. I have seen the enemy and the enemy is me. I have seen the dysfunction and the dysfunction is in me. I have seen the sin and the sin is in me and I have enough of it that I don't need to be worrying about anyone else. Because you see, when we can see what is really going on in here and when we can see how much grace has been needed in here and when we can see what little room I have to stand on and when I can see that I have nothing to crow about and when I can see that I've got enough work to work on in here – then I can see the life of the other with a little more kindness.

We all know the story about the woman on a long layover at the airport went in to the shop to purchase a book and along with it a bag of cookies. She sat herself down and started reading and noticed the man next to her reaching into her bag of cookies and helping himself to a couple. That's kind of rude, without asking. She took a couple for herself and then the man took a couple more.

Who does he think he is? She took a handful and he took a handful. I can't believe this guy! Finally there was one left. He took it. Broke it in half and gave her half. She snatched it with disgust. Just then her plane was called and walked off in a huff. Got on the plane and reached into her bag to get her book and saw the bag of cookies – her bag of cookies. And it dawned on her – it wasn't her bag the man was taking from, it was his own. She was the thief, not him.

We are most unkind when we focus on the sin of another and not our own.

We are a mystery, aren't we? You and me. The apostle says, "I do not do the very thing I want to do. And that which I don't want to do is what I do!" And I'll take it a step further – there is enough broken in me that the brokenness keeps me from seeing even more of the brokenness. Oh, but here let me with the plank in my own eye – let me stick my finger in your eye and help you with that little piece of dust.

Was it Adam Lindsay Gordon who said, "Life is mostly froth and bubble, Two things stand like stone, Kindness in another's trouble, Courage in your own." For it does take great courage, doesn't it, for you and me to weigh deep into the mystery of our own lives and find there the brokenness, the mastodons, the sin, the plank, the thievery, the identified patient – it takes great courage to realize what a broken mystery you really are – and then with grace to see the other as one who likely needs nothing more from you ... than for you to be kind. Just kind. Could you just be kind?

Can I tell you the end of the Julie Johnson story? It happened when Mrs. Michaels died. Mrs. Michaels was a first grade teacher at Gordon Elementary. She appeared to be as old as God to most of us. So we made fun of her too. All of us, except for Julie. Julie loved Mrs. Michaels. She'd stay after school to help her. She'd clean erasers and wash the chalkboard for Mrs. Michaels. Well, Mrs. Michaels died. And she had been a member of my father's church ... so my dad made me go with him to the funeral home to see Mr. Michaels. Well, I didn't want to go, but I did. And when I got there I kind of sat in a chair in the front of the room waiting for it to be over ... when all of a sudden who should walk into the room but Julie Johnson. "Oh no," I said to myself, "what is she doing here?" I don't remember but I might have even lifted my feet from the ground. But then I watched as Julie made her way to the casket all by herself ... and she went right for Mr. Michaels ... and she grabbed

him and hugged him ... and in the midst of her tears she said to him, "I loved Mrs. Michaels very much." And Mr. Michaels hugged her back and said, "Well, Julie, she loved you very much too. You were her special friend."

You're darn right I should have had my feet off the ground. For it was holy ground before me. Too holy for this identified patient. Fruit of the Spirit, dare I say. Kindness in another's trouble. Courage in our own.