

Welcome to the Table

Luke 7:36-50; NRSV

The title of the movie was “Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner.” The issue was racial boundaries. The daughter was bringing her fiance to dinner, so that he might meet her parents. Problem was, she was white; he was black. The mother of the girl whom I was dating at that particular time informed us that we *were not* to go to the Rives Theater where that particular movie was showing. **(Pause)**

Rarely are boundaries more clearly drawn than around the dinner table. We typically are somewhat circumspect regarding whom we invite for dinner. When someone invites a close friend of the opposite gender to dinner at their parents’ home, things are usually getting pretty serious. In the Old South, when revival came every year, it was considered an honor to prepare the evening meal for the visiting preacher. Even today, when we want to spend time with close friends, more often than not our time together will be planned around a meal.

The table is a place of intimacy. From time immemorial, the sharing of food has been one of the most intimate of human activities. In a meal, we share that which is absolutely crucial to life with those whom we love. A meal together is a daily sacrament of family life, an outwardly visible sign of an inward affection and grace.

Today, we are invited to share a meal with Jesus. The blessing has been said and God’s presence has been invoked. Simon is, after all, very religious. All goes well until a woman enters, and not just any woman, but “a woman of the city,” a sinner. She comes in, let’s down her hair, and proceeds to wash and to kiss the tired feet of Jesus. She anoints them with oil. All the while she is silently weeping.

Jesus notes that she is a model of kind hospitality. In an era when travel was on foot and sandals were worn, when a guest entered your home it was customary to greet them with a kiss and wash their tired, dusty feet as a sign of welcome. However, it’s more than Simon can take.

The problem here isn't a social problem; it's a religious problem. "If this man were a [real] prophet," Simon says to himself, and probably to the people seated around him, "he would be able to see what sort of woman she is . . . a sinner." After all, what are prophets for if not to be able to recognize sin when it occurs, point to the *boundaries* between the holy and the unholy, the righteous and the unrighteous. If Jesus were really a prophet, he would be able to see and he would speak up. After all, Simon can see these things, religious man that he is.

Jesus responds with a parable, a story. Many Baptists think the only proper way to preach and teach is verse by verse, but Jesus didn't quote much scripture; he told stories. One man, it seems, owed his creditor great sum of money, another only a small amount. The creditor forgave both loans. Think now Simon, which one would be the most grateful.

The Lord then turns toward the woman, "Simon, look at this woman. You showed me no hospitality; yet, look how she welcomes me."

It's all a matter of perception. Simon, look at this woman. What do you see? *A sinner to be excluded? Or a sinner in need of love, forgiveness, and reconciliation?* Is she a rule breaker who should be punished for her violations? Or is she a person full of hunger who needs life-giving nourishment? ***It all depends on how we look at it, doesn't it.*** Notice the difference in the way Simon, the religious man, sees this woman of the city and the way Jesus sees her. Someone deserving of our hospitality or someone to be excluded? One of *us* or one of *them*?

How do we see things? When we gather for Holy Communion, what does this meal mean? Whom do you see gathered at the table? Is this a meal just for family? Just for those gathered into the fold? Or is this a meal which knows no boundaries, a meal of invitation and inclusion, meant to be shared with the whole world? Is this a meal for the righteous elect? *Or is this a meal for sinners being forgiven?*

And perhaps an even more pertinent question, when we gather for worship or fellowship or small groups, are we gathering for us, for the insiders, or are we gathering primarily for those on the outside? When we come together and invoke the presence of Jesus with prayer and song, how do we understand this story about Jesus and Simon? This story about a “woman of the city,” an outsider and a sinner, who hears Jesus welcome her with the words: “Your sins are forgiven.” **(Pause-Pause)**

I remember one of my aunt Ethel’s stories about attending the annual homecoming at a rural Baptist church where some of her husband’s kinfolk were members. While she was sitting at the table eating fried chicken and potato salad, the church matriarch came over and introduced herself and inquired who she was. The matriarch told her, “We don’t get many visitors here. Most of us are family and old friends. We like it that way.” *And Jesus wept.*

You want to know what God’s boundaries are like? Who is invited to the table and who isn’t? Just walk out on your deck on a cool summer morning and feel the rain on your face — God’s unmerited blessing, God’s grace. Responding to a question about who is our neighbor, who we are to love, who stands within the boundaries of God’s grace, Jesus said, “Your Father who is in heaven . . . sends rain on the just and on the unjust. If you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Don’t even the tax collectors do the same? And if you salute only your brethren, what more are you doing than others? Do not even those who are not God’s people do the same?” (Mt. 5:45 ff)

Boundaries. Grace. Christian hospitality. Too often the church has used religion to draw lines across the world. Lines that demarcate the sinners from the saved, the insiders from the outsiders, family whom we know from those whom we don’t know and have no desire to know. It’s all a function of our vision. In Jesus, Simon sees only a wanna-be prophet. The woman of the city sees someone who evidently has treated her with respect, someone who values her as a human being created in the image of God. In the woman, Simon sees only an a sinner, an outsider, someone undeserving of his

time or attention. Jesus sees one of God's children, a lost member of the family struggling to find her way home. He welcomes her to the Lord's table, a table characterized by grace and inclusiveness.

Those who are his disciples will do no less.

I don't know that I'm very religious. I have to say that over the course of my 59 years, religion hasn't impressed me all that much. Seems to be more of a burden than a joy. I do hope, however, that I am a disciple of Jesus, one who without reservation says to those around me, "Come, join us sinners at the table. God's grace is good." *God's grace is good.* Amen.