

“An Unwelcome Guest at the Table”

Family Matters, part 7

Luke 7:36-50

[title] We are in God’s house this morning. We came at Christ’s invitation to hear the good news, that we are a redeemed people. No matter where you’re from and what you’ve done, Christ offers you an eternal relationship of love. That’s what we are here to learn about. Would you pray with me?

Lord Jesus, thank you for your mercy. We don’t deserve the love you have shown us. Help us in this moment to listen to your Spirit and to be obedient to your calling. Open our ears, our minds, and our hearts. We want to see you. Amen.

This morning I want us to walk through a bible story together. I encourage you to follow along using the pew Bibles, but try not to get caught reading ahead! I want us to experience this story together, one section at a time.

Have you ever been invited to someone’s house for dinner? I was once invited by a couple for a meal after I had just moved to a new town. I was a little nervous about meeting them face to face. So I made sure to dress nicely, show up on time, smile and shake their hands at the door, take off my shoes...all that good stuff. Then while I was sitting at the table, I had one of the most embarrassing moments of my life: I gagged on a cup of tea and accidentally spit up all over a basket of fresh muffins. I was mortified! But the couple took it well, and graciously gave me the rest of the muffins to take home.

So, that’s not usually how a dinner goes. But there are things we expect when invited to someone’s home. The greeting at the door, the offer to take your coat, get you a glass of water. As you enter, you probably notice that they have taken the time to clean up the house, light some candles, set the table. In our culture, that’s hospitality.

With that image in mind, let’s open our bibles to Luke 7:36.

[text] When one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him, he went to the Pharisee’s house and reclined at the table.

Luke doesn’t say why Jesus was invited, but we suspect that it might have been because Jesus was famous. Maybe the Pharisee was curious, or maybe (and more likely) he wanted to test Jesus. But here’s the deal: it wasn’t just the two of

them alone. This meal was a banquet, with an open door. Literally, the people on the street could pop in and out to see what was happening. Guests could stand in the room and watch, listen in on the conversation.

[picture] The Jewish style of eating was to set the food on a low, long table, and recline on couches or cushions as they ate. A few other details: as a guest, you would be greeted at the door with a kiss of welcome, either on the hand or on the cheek, and you would take off your shoes...sandals...at the door. As you were “seated” at the table, a servant would have poured water over your feet. If there was no servant, water would at least be made available.

If any of these customs were neglected, the guest would have been offended. Hospitality was taken very seriously in this culture. In a time without Motel 6 and the Holiday Inn Express, hospitality could be a matter of life and death. At the very least, you were expected to show respect to your guests, especially if you were someone as important as a Pharisee, a leader of the Jewish community. Leviticus 19:34 actually tells us that God commanded the people to show hospitality to all.

So the next few verses in the story come as a real shock. Let’s read on.
(Luke 7:37-38)

[text] A woman in that town who lived a sinful life learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee’s house, so she came there with an alabaster jar of perfume. As she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them.

[picture] Wow, has this ever happened to any of you at dinner? Someone started washing your feet? Probably not. The scripture tells us this woman was “sinful.” It’s not hard to read between the lines here. She was most likely a prostitute. You know what it’s like in a small town. Once you have a bad reputation, it’s nearly impossible to get rid of it. But because this dinner was open, she could just walk right in. She had a plan – to honor Jesus. She saw how he was treated – disrespected, not given the basic measures of hospitality. So she did something about it. She stood behind him – remember, he was reclining at the table, so his feet were stretched out – and she cried over his feet, wiping

them off, not with a towel, but with her own hair. Then she broke the seal on her jar of anointing oil and poured it on his feet.

Have you ever been in Bath and Body Works? Or a candle shop? You know when the smell of some fragrance is overpowering? That must have been what it was like. Had I been there, I'm sure I would have sneezed. And everyone would have heard me, too, because her behavior was so unexpected, so shocking, everyone would have stopped talking immediately and just stared. She took her hair down – a big no-no in Jewish culture. Clearly, her intentions were tender and grateful, but she had crossed a very bad line.

The Pharisee certainly seemed to think so. Look at the next verse. (Luke 7:39)

[text] When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is—that she is a sinner."

Condemnation 101. This man didn't care what this woman was going through. He looked at her in disgust. He was the epitome of arrogance. You might recall a similar story Jesus told that illustrates this horrible attitude. (Luke 18:9-14) Two men go to pray – a Pharisee and a tax collector. The Pharisee says, "God, I'm so glad I'm so great. I'm not like that guy over there." And the tax collector beats his chest and won't even look up to heaven. He just says, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner." Jesus commended the humble tax collector, not the "righteous," arrogant Pharisee. The same arrogance is being shown here.

[picture] We have outcasts in our society, don't we? The homeless. The mentally ill. Drug users. Abusers. Alcoholics. People of different religion and race. Anybody who doesn't fit our pre-conceived image of what a "good" person looks like. In Jesus' day, it was the prostitutes, the tax collectors, the lepers, the Samaritans. All of them were labeled "sinners." Times haven't changed all that much, have they?

Imagine being there, in this moment, watching as part of the crowd. It's tense. What will Jesus do with this outcast woman? What will the host do? Will they throw her out? Rebuke her? Laugh at her? Scorn her? Spit on her?

You read ahead, didn't you? Caught you! Anyway, I'll bet you know that nothing angers Jesus more than seeing someone being oppressed. Jesus takes

this moment of judgment and turns it on its head with a simple teaching story.
(Luke 7:40-43)

[text] Jesus answered him, “Simon, I have something to tell you.”

“Tell me, teacher,” he said.

“Two people owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he forgave the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?”

Simon replied, “I suppose the one who had the bigger debt forgiven.”

“You have judged correctly,” Jesus said.

[picture] The amount of money isn't critical, but if you don't know, a denarius is a silver coin, about as much as you could earn in one day. The point is that Jesus gets Simon to admit that the right response to grace is love. Note how hard it is even for Simon to say that...he qualifies it with an “I suppose” because he suspects he knows where this story is leading. Then Jesus throws down the hammer, spiritually speaking. (Luke 7:44-48)

[text] Then he turned toward the woman and said to Simon, “Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet. Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—as her great love has shown. But whoever has been forgiven little loves little.”

Then Jesus said to her, “Your sins are forgiven.”

[picture] I don't know if we all understand that as shocking as the woman's behavior was to Jesus, his response is even more shocking. Jesus reprimands his host! First, Jesus addresses the woman directly, turning away from the Pharisee, giving her the respect she deserves. Second, he calls out his host for being rude. I can tell you, I have never done this. I might have had the worst meal ever, the house might be dirty and smell bad, but Momma said, “If you can't say anything nice...” That rule doesn't apply to Jesus, because Jesus knows how to set the world right. Jesus gives justice to the woman, and the forgiveness she so

desperately needs. He points out, correctly, that the woman had experienced such sin and pain and regret in her life, that her response to mercy is greater than anything the Pharisee ever did. “No water for my feet? She gave me her tears. No kiss at the door? She kissed my feet. No oil for my head? She poured costly perfume on me.” It seems that the woman is living in reality, and the Pharisee is deceiving himself.

There is so much wrong at the start of this story: rudeness, pride, selfishness, judgment, rejection, sexism, labeling. And Jesus makes it right with his love and forgiveness. We know how the woman responds. But we don’t know what the crowd and the Pharisee do. There is only this ending. (Luke 7:49-50) *[text] The other guests began to say among themselves, “Who is this who even forgives sins?”*

Jesus said to the woman, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.”

[picture] Did the Pharisee learn his lesson? Did the crowd realize that Jesus could in fact forgive sins, because he was God? We don’t know. But the conclusion of this story isn’t about them, after all. It’s about us.

Jesus came to break down barriers. Between God and us. Between insiders and outsiders. Luke as a gospel is full of amazing stories where prostitutes and tax collectors and lepers and other “lowlife” in Jewish society end up being the heroes. The point is that we often judge those who need love and grace.

We need to realize that at the Table of Grace, we are the prostitutes. We are the lepers. We are the sinners. And Jesus extends to all of us his mercy.

We have a choice. Will we act like the Pharisee, or the woman? It’s so easy to think, “Of course I deserve God’s love. I’m an insider. I have it all together. I worship in church on Sundays. God loves me because he has to!” But the woman never took God’s love for granted. She showed it in her humility, her gratitude, her possessions... She took a great risk to show Jesus her love, because she knew how powerful his forgiveness was.

The one thing that will absolutely kill a church is arrogance. When we start looking inward, thinking all that matters is that we put on a good appearance for each other on Sunday, the church will die. But when we treat each other with

love, kindness, respect, even if our first reaction is “they don’t deserve it,” we will see the church grow, because Jesus will be the center, not us.

I need to ask you a hard question. Are you someone who loves little, because you are forgiven little? Or are you someone who loves much, because you have been forgiven much?

Let us never forget that God’s loves and forgiveness are available to all. Even those we have difficulty welcoming to the table. May God grant us all the grace we need to accept others and realize that we are all sinners in need of his mercy.

Memory Verse

Luke 18:14 (NIV) - “...All those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

Reflection questions

1. When have you been made to feel welcome in someone’s home? In a different church?
2. Have you ever felt like an outcast because of something you have done? Did you experience forgiveness? How?
3. Who are the outcasts in today’s society?
4. With whom in the scripture do you resonate most? The woman? The Pharisee? The crowd? Why?
5. How can we practice Jesus’ radical hospitality? How can we make our church attractive to “sinners”?