

## ***Guess Who's Coming To Dinner***

[FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH](#) of Kissimmee, Florida

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6/17/07

Luke 7:36-8:3 (NRSV)

One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and took his place at the table. [37] And a woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. [38] She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment. [39] Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, "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." [40] Jesus spoke up and said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." "Teacher," he replied, "Speak." [41] "A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. [42] When they could not pay, he canceled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?" [43] Simon answered, "I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt." And Jesus said to him, "You have judged rightly." [44] Then turning toward the woman, he said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? 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. [45] You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. [46] You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. [47] 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." [48] Then he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." [49] But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?" [50] And he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

[8:1] Soon afterwards he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, [2] as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, [3] and Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their resources.

### EATING AND DRINKING WITH SINNERS

Recently a repairman came to our house, and shared with my wife the fact that he was a musician. They had a weekly gig at a famous saloon in our area. As a part of the conversation, Carrollyn casually mentioned that I played the saxophone. The part time musician said that they desperately needed a new sax player. Perhaps I would be willing to consider joining the band.

I'm sure that once he heard what I did for a living that might not have sounded like such an idea. But, I have to admit that I was intrigued by the idea. The thought of a Presbyterian pastor spending Friday and Saturday nights at the local saloon seemed a bit amusing to me.

Can you imagine what people might say? Can you imagine how doing such a thing would leave a minister open to criticism?

Why, some of my church members might even call Presbytery office and suggest that the Committee on Ministry investigate this turn of events. “This pastor of ours is hanging with the wrong kind of people in the wrong kind of places. Some even say that he’s drinking too much and partying too much. What kind of minister does that sort of thing?”

Of course, I would be in good company if that were to happen. In the gospel of Luke this is a recurring criticism of Jesus. He was always eating and drinking with the wrong people. It made the religious leaders of his day suspicious.

They said things like, “This Jesus is a glutton and a lush. He’s spending way too much time with the tax collectors and sinners.” (Luke 7:34)

Many of us would have said the same thing about Jesus. We tell our children, “You are known by the company you keep.” We are very careful about the image we project. We are very careful about how we dress and what we say. We don’t want people getting the wrong idea about us.

#### IN THE WORLD BUT NOT OF THE WORLD

Today’s lesson invites us to consider a dilemma that faces all who would follow Jesus. How can we be in the world and yet not of the world? How can we eat and drink with everyone and yet maintain a faithful lifestyle? This is not an easy thing to do. It’s always a difficult balancing act.

We usually fall off the beam in one direction or another. Either we are too rigid in our evaluation of others or we are too lax in our evaluation of ourselves.

Mark Twain once wrote about a man who was “a good man in the worst sense of the word.” We all know what he was talking about. We’ve met someone who fits that description. They have a self-righteous and condescending attitude. They are religious, and they know it. Often they are leaders in the community. They like to think of themselves as the guardians of public morality.

And if they would invite me to dinner, I’m not so sure I would like to come. I might feel out of place at the local saloon, but I would feel equally out of place at one these formal parties where a social occasion becomes yet another opportunity to size people up and put them in their place.

And yet when Jesus was invited to dinner by a Pharisee, Jesus did not hesitate to come. Jesus was willing to associate with anyone. He not only ate with the common folk and sinners. He also ate with the political and religious elite. He was not afraid to engage any person because his message of God’s love was for the world, the whole world.

Whenever I think of the ministry of Jesus, I think of a poem by Rudyard Kipling that I learned in middle school. Kipling wrote in his poem, *If*,

“If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue, or walk with Kings nor lose the common touch ... Yours is the Earth and everything that’s in it ”

Kipling’s challenge is similar to the challenge presented by the life and ministry of Jesus. How can we live authentically and righteously in a world that seeks to make us compromise in some way? How can we be in the world but not of the world?

#### OUR BAGGAGE

We can begin by being realistic. We can begin by saying that though we seek to follow Jesus, we certainly are not Jesus. We will always fall short in some significant way when it comes to our relationships with others.

We will tend toward the extremes. We will tend to be either coldly self-righteous or content to wink at sin and become comfortable with a way of life that is not becoming of a disciple of Christ (the cheap grace that Bonhoeffer talked about).

Neither of these options should be acceptable to those who would be a disciple of Jesus. We must learn to identify not only with those who are self-righteous leaders but also with those who are notorious sinners because in fact we are both. When we come to dinner with Jesus we all come with our own “baggage.”

Some of us weep bitter tears at his feet because of the ways that we have failed him. We wonder if it is even possible for us to be forgiven.

And some of us secretly resent the way Jesus is so gracious toward notorious sinners. In our hearts we think they do not even have the right to be at the table with us. We wonder each week as we say the Lord’s Prayer if it is possible to really forgive the debts of others as he forgives our debts. It doesn’t seem like a fair trade.

But, no matter how we come to the table of God’s kingdom today, we come with a need for forgiveness. We come with a need to understand that we are in debt up to our eyes and the only way out is bankruptcy. We come to the Lord’s Table admitting that we don’t have what it takes to get the job done, that we need a new start.

Forgiveness is at the heart of this passage and at the heart of the gospel.

#### A FINANCIAL IMAGE

When I use the Lord’s Prayer with people who are from different religious traditions, I like to help everyone stay together by saying half jokingly that when we Presbyterians talk about sin in the Lord’s Prayer we use a financial image. We pray, “Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.”

And in this particular passage Jesus also uses a financial image to explain forgiveness. He tells Simon, the Pharisee who is hosting the dinner a little parable about two men who owed money. One of the men owed 50 silver pieces and another man owed 500 silver pieces. And neither could pay what they owed.

But, the creditor showed mercy toward those who could not pay. He forgave their debts. And Jesus asked Simon a question, “Which of these two debtors would love the creditor more?” And Simon answered, “I suppose the one who was forgiven the most.”

That’s the right answer. Great love for Jesus is based upon a sense of humility and an honest evaluation of our own shortcomings. People who are self-righteous often underestimate how much they owe and how much they have been forgiven. And as a result their love for Jesus is not what it should be.

But, what’s the difference? If we owe 50 silver pieces and can’t pay or if we owe 500 silver pieces and can’t pay, we all have one thing in common. Each of us owes more, way more than we could ever pay. But, until we understand that, we cannot really accept Jesus and appropriate the salvation that He offers.

#### OPENING THE DOOR TO SALVATION

Jesus had a way of sensing what was really blocking a person from seeking the kingdom of God and forcing them to take a hard look at their lives.

For example, in the case of the rich young ruler, it was money. He loved it too much, and he had too much of it. So Jesus asked him to give all that he had to the poor and come follow him. The cost of following Jesus was too much in this case and the rich young ruler went away sad.

Another rich man, a man named Zacchaeus also loved his money and his position of power as a tax collector. But, in this case he was willing to give it up to follow Jesus. Jesus invited himself to dinner with Zacchaeus and his scandalous tax collecting friends. And this invitation changed the tax collector's life.

He spontaneously gave half of all he had to the poor and promised to repay anyone he had cheated fourfold. Jesus said that "salvation" had come to Zacchaeus.

In the case of our lesson for today, the sinful woman (probably a prostitute according to most commentators) recognizes that she has become dependent upon the money she gets from selling sex.

So she bathes Jesus's feet with the tears of confession and lets down her hair to dry his feet, and then kisses his feet. In a final symbol of repentance, she lavishly uses the expensive perfume purchased with her ill gotten gains to anoint the feet of Jesus.

This dramatic gesture is a symbol of her genuine and costly repentance. And this is why Jesus finally says to the woman,

"I forgive your sins ... Your faith has saved you. Go in peace."

In contrast, Simon the host of the party does not even do what every good host would do for an honored guest. He does not greet Jesus with a customary greeting kiss. He does not make sure that Jesus' feet are washed. He does not anoint him with oil.

Simon does not love Jesus like the sinful woman loves because Simon does not see himself as a debtor. Simon sees himself as a creditor, a person who is in charge, a person who has money and power and prestige.

And these are the very things that keep him from what he really needs, the love and forgiveness of God as revealed in Jesus Christ. His heart has grown judgmental and cold. He thinks that people like this woman have made their own bed ... and now they just have to lie in it.

But, Jesus thinks that change is possible ... for this sinful woman and for Simon as well. Jesus comes to tell us that it is possible to be born again, that we can reorder our lives and go in a different direction. It is never too late for any of us.

#### A COMMA NOT A PERIOD

The great comedian, Gracie Allen once said, "Never put a period where God puts a comma." That's a good way to talk about the grace of God. We are often too anxious to put a period on a person's life, to say that this is who "they" are and this is who "we" are and nothing will ever change.

But, the story of God's grace is filled with commas instead of periods. A comma indicates that there is more to come in a sentence, and in the same way God says that there is more to come in our life. Forgiveness and new life are always a possibility. No matter how much we owe or our station in life, we can change.

When we really understand that, tears of joy and repentance will flow from our eyes as well, and we too will desire to serve Jesus. We too will give all that we have in order to follow him. We too will know that when Jesus looks at us, he doesn't see someone who is worthless or is beyond forgiveness.

He sees a life that still has a comma in front of it instead of a period. He sees a life that can change for the better through the power of his love and forgiveness.

Did you ever wonder how this sinful woman got up the nerve to even attend this dinner party with these religious dignitaries? Didn't she know that her presence would be unwelcome? Couldn't she guess that her very presence would open her up to ridicule and compromise the standing of Jesus?

I'm sure she knew that her presence at the feet of Jesus would cause quite a stir. But, she had also heard how people were criticizing Jesus. In Luke 7:34 which immediately precedes our lesson for today we read that the religious elite were criticizing Jesus by saying that he was a "friend of tax collectors and sinners."

What they meant as a criticism offered this woman hope. I think this woman may have reasoned, "If Jesus is a friend of tax collectors and sinners, maybe he can be my friend as well. Maybe Jesus will invite me to the table."

And in our lesson for today we learn that Jesus does just that.

#### A BANQUET FOR ALL

This story is reminiscent of a story from the Hebrew Scriptures. The prophet Isaiah foresaw a time when everyone would be filled at the banquet table of the Lord. There would be a great feast when even the poor could come freely and eat and drink. He wrote,

"Lo, everyone who thirsts,  
Come to the waters;  
And he who has no money,  
Come, buy and eat!  
Come, buy wine and milk  
Without money and without price." (Isaiah 55:1)

In God's kingdom, everyone is invited to the table.  
God in Christ comes to eat with us all.

If you were at that dinner party long ago, where would you have been seated at the table? Would you have been among the Pharisees, the good, religious upright people, good people in the worst sense of the word?

Many of us here today would fit into that category. I know I probably would.

And some of us here today would identify with the sinful woman. We don't feel very good about ourselves and yet we don't quite know what to do about it. We don't know how to change a lifestyle that is obviously self-destructive. Sometimes I feel that way. Don't you?

The good news is that Jesus eats with both kinds of sinners. He forgives those who weep bitterly over past sins, and he earnestly instructs those whose self-righteous attitudes will not allow them to understand the depth of their

need. Everyone is invited to the table of forgiveness. And everyone is invited to consider those areas of their life where they need to change in order to follow Jesus.

The possibility for change represents salvation. And salvation never comes cheap. There will always be bitter tears and embarrassing revelations. Don't invite Jesus to dinner if you want to avoid the truth. But, if you want to be saved, you might consider inviting him to your dinner table and into your life.

## LISTENING TO THE NOISE

A college professor taught in a classroom that was located on a busy downtown street. Each day the sounds of emergency vehicles interrupted his lectures just as he began. (I can empathize with that. Sometimes it seems like the fire department goes screaming down the road right when I am to begin my sermon.)

Each day the teacher would begin his class complaining about the sound of those emergency vehicles and their sirens. But, one day the teacher began his class in a different way. He said that he wanted to apologize to the class. That weekend his wife had an emergency situation. The service that the ambulance provided saved his wife's life and the life of their baby.

He told his students,  
"I was guilty of thinking about the noise instead of thinking about the lives."

I think this is the mistake that many of us make. We think about the noise. We think about how our dinner parties and our lectures and our sermons are so rudely interrupted by those desperately seeking help.

But, maybe salvation is to be found in the noise. Maybe salvation is to be found in that harsh sound, the sound that forces us to quit what we are doing and consider something more important ... like the person who is in great need.

Simon invited Jesus to dinner for a nice theological discussion. They would have a pleasant meal, learn some interesting ideas and then go home "enlightened" but not really changed in any significant way.

But, their dinner plans were interrupted by this audacious crying woman who embarrassed everyone with her foolish actions. She embarrassed everyone that is except Jesus. Jesus saw the interruption as an opportunity for true teaching.

The Bible tells us that the very presence of our Lord can be found when our nicely ordered life is interrupted by a person in great need. That surprise dinner guest just might be the presence of Jesus himself.

So guess who's coming to dinner at your house this coming week? Guess who will be interrupting your carefully staged social event with her persistent need for forgiveness and salvation?

God help us be good hosts. Amen.

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