

MAYFLOWER CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH
3901 NORTHWEST 63RD STREET
OKLAHOMA CITY, OK 73116
REV. DR. ROBIN R. MEYERS, SENIOR MINISTER
405-842-8897
cyasunday@mayflowerucc.org
www.mayflowerucc.org
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Luke 7:36-50
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HOSTING A SEMINAR ON FORGIVENESS

A self-important and wealthy Pharisee named Simon throws a dinner party in the Roman tradition where all the guests recline at the table and make a long evening of it. And don't you know that an invitation to one of Simon's feasts was quite the coveted item, and quite the subject of gossip about town. Who gets to go? Why did he invite so and so? And what really goes on in there anyway — you know, by way of entertainment?

And for some reason (we don't why, because no reason is given) he invites Jesus of Nazareth. And of course, Jesus accepts. Apparently, if you ask Jesus to dinner, he always accepts.

In fact, as far as I can tell, when it come to invitations, Jesus was easy. If you asked him to come to your house, to eat, to heal, even to raise someone from the dead who doesn't smell too good — he accepted. Sure, I'll be right over. And it didn't matter who was doing the asking either, including the wealthy and the powerful, tax collectors, doctors of the law, even Pharisees — those at whom he often aimed his most scathing criticisms (like say, calling them "a brood of vipers").

Which makes me wonder, why does Simon invite Jesus? I suspect it was because Jesus was already something of a novelty himself and Simon found the idea of having a rural rabbi at the table to be rather quaint. Like a bonus for the other guests — like a party favor. Come to my party, and by the way I've invited Jesus — that teacher of wisdom, the intense but obviously deluded man. The one Mary Oliver describes in one her

poems as the man of Melancholy Madness. This should spice up the conversation. You heard about him, now talk to him in person. Let's see what an uneducated messianic prophet has to say about current events, tax policy, and the price of bread. Rumor has it he's not too fond of Pharisees. Do you suppose he will bite the hand that feeds him?

I mean come on, things haven't changed a bit. I think you know this, intuitively, about diner parties. Being put on display, which is often what hosts have in mind, doesn't seem to bother Jesus a bit. Perhaps it was as simple as this: If you don't get in you can't do ministry. If you are out in the hall, you can't possibly teach the teacher anything. Unlike John the Baptist, Jesus did not make a habit of decrying the sins of the world out in the desert. He took his gospel into town, into the homes of rich and poor alike — even those he believed had given religion a bad name — even, of course, into the Temple itself, to drive out the money changers. So he not only accepted the most dubious of invitations, he also went in where he wasn't invited.

I wish more ministers would get this message — that if your enemy invites you to dinner, you should go. When I lived in Detroit I got invited once to have lunch with Jerry Falwell. I was just a young pup of a minister and the phone rang in my office at Bushnell church, and it was the religion editor of the Detroit Free Press. He was doing a story in those days about the rise of something called The Moral Majority, and I was writing columns for the paper and so he told Rev. Falwell that he would like to invite a young preacher along to join us. So it would be the three of us, I said? Yes.

Did I say yes? You bet I did. I was 29 years old, and I got to sit in on the interview and listen to what Jerry Falwell thought was wrong with American and what he planned to do about it. It scared me to death.

Once, while we chewed our food, and there was a moment of silence, Falwell looked over at me for some sign of approval (from the fellow minister, who needed to show his credentials, say, "Mega dittos Jerry" or something like that) — not just sit there looking pale. "You don't believe a word I've said, do you young man?" "With all due respect, Rev. Falwell, no I don't. To me this is the not the way of Jesus." He grunted, "So you plan to just roll over and let the secular humanists take over the country? "Roll over?" That's an interesting choice of words. It's used a lot out at the state capitol. "Well he said. I'll pray for you, so you don't fail in your ministry."

“I appreciate that,” I replied, and then I thought a very dark thought – a thought that I was not proud of. I wanted to say, “I’ll pray for your ministry too, that you will fail at it.” That, however, is not the way of Jesus either. So I chewed my food and thought to myself, “I’m glad I’m here, because this is not the last we will hear from this man. He will change the country, even though it will be in ways I do not like. And nothing happens if you don’t accept the invitation. Nothing happens if you stand and stare from a distance.

As I read this text I wondered what might have happened if it had not been me at lunch with Jerry Falwell, but Jesus — incognito of course. And in the middle of the meal, as the three of them worked over a good patty melt and downed a glass of iced tea, a prostitute had walked in off the street, a woman who wasn’t invited but saw Jesus through the window, and came in weeping for joy at having been forgiven by him—her joy being in direct proportion to her sins (which were many) and then started bathing the feet of this stranger (who was really Jesus) with her tears and wiping them with her hair.

My lunch with Jerry Falwell, which was the title of a column I wrote about the experience, occurred in a venerable Detroit dining establishment called The Chop House, a watering hole where the well-connected and politically active went to see and be seen. And of course, they have security to handle unexpected intrusions. Homeless people sometimes wandered in off the street looking for scraps, and they were quickly ushered out. But in the case of Simon’s party, it would have been more complicated for this reason.

At a Roman style dinner party, the guests would have sat around couches in one room, each guest supported on an elbow, his sandals removed, and then from a side room, outsiders would be permitted to approach the guests to bring food, remove or refill empty vessels, or for various suppliant reasons. They came and went from out of the shadows of the next room. They were the kitchen staff or the courtesans. They were the servants. They did not speak. They served – part of the established order in the Empire of wealth, then as now.

You snap your fingers, food appears, you wave you hand, dirty dishes disappear. Someone lights you cigar, refills your glass, asks you if everything is satisfactory and to your liking Mr. Simon, and then brings by a dessert cart. Maybe, depending on the host and the nature of the party, there is entertainment. But everybody knows their place and stays in it. There are those who serve and those who deserve to be served. God understands and approves.

The woman referred to as a sinner is therefore able to enter into this scene as one of the outsiders. The washing of feet would not have been an unusual occurrence since it was a common courtesy in those days of dusty roads and sandals, but everyone knew this woman and what kind of woman she was.

In fact, Simon makes a fascinating comment, arguing that if Jesus was truly a prophet, he too would have known what sort of woman was touching him. That makes me believe that Simon was putting Jesus to the test, having heard others describe him a great prophet, and so this whole occasion was as an opportunity to have a look at the guy, up close and personal, and then in comes Ms. Notorious.

She not only washes his feet, she anoints them with an expensive jar of alabaster oil — and her hair is obviously down. The crowd mummurs, people turn to whisper disapprovingly to one another, even the servants stop and stare. It's one thing to ask this country bumpkin to sit at my royal table; it's another when his friends start crashing the party and making a scene.

And let's face it; the story is fraught with sexual tension. The women's sins are not named, but it is typical of the text to let the reader draw reasonable conclusions. I believe she was a prostitute and in a world of purity and appearances, this whole scene is just too much. You can guess what people would have whispered: "So how well do these two know each other?" A lot of nervous throat clearing. Today we might say under our breath, "Get a room."

So Simon, the host with the most, clears the air of the awkward silence. He says to himself, but certainly loud enough for everyone to hear, that this proves that we do not have a true prophet in our midst, but rather a pretender, a fool. Prophets know which women in town are to be avoided, so Jesus can't be a prophet. That's an interesting definition of a prophet by the way: Someone who sees trouble and avoids it — a kind of purity clairvoyant.

But Jesus responds by offering a simple example of indebtedness, one man owes five hundred denarii, and the other man owes fifty. Neither can pay the debt so the creditor cancels both. Now which one will love him more? Simon answers, "I suppose the one for whom he cancelled the greater debt." And Jesus, like a good teacher, says, "You have judged rightly." But he is also trapped.

The room falls silent as everyone listens. Then Jesus lists all the ways in which his host was not really a true host. It is critique of Simon's pretensions, as one by one he lists the small but calculated insults that have been dealt him since he arrived as a guest. He does play the injured party, but makes it clear that these are social omissions on Simon's part.

It would be difficult to overstate what a blow this is, since being perceived as a good host was so important – especially in one's own home.

Then Jesus contrasts his treatment by his host with his treatment by this woman, who did the things the Simon should have done, and is therefore closer to the Kingdom of God than he is. You can almost feel all the air go out of the room. The power has shifted from the host to the guest. Jesus is hosting a seminar on forgiveness among a group of people who don't think they need any.

Her sins were many, Jesus admits, but they are all forgiven. She has a reputation, of course, but now she has a chance to start over. Her joy is equal to the mountain of guilt and shame that has been swept away, and since she cannot pretend to be anyone other than who she is, she has no hesitation about expressing her joy either. What has she got to lose?

I can't read this text without thinking about that song from the rock opera Jesus Christ Superstar, in which Mary Magdalene, who is assumed to be the woman in this story and notoriously assumed to be a prostitute although there is no evidence that she was, sings a song called, I Don't Know How to Love Him."

In these haunting lyrics, she confronts a different understanding of love that is both confusing to her and liberating. I don't know how to love him/What to do, how to move him/I've changed, yes really changed/In these past few days/When I've seen myself/I seem like someone else.

I don't know how to take this/I don't see why he moves me/He's a man/He's just a man/And I've had so many Men before/In very many ways/He's just one more.

Should I bring him down/Should I scream and shout/Should I speak of love?/Let my feelings out?/I never thought I'd come to this/What's it all about?

Don't you think it's rather funny/I should be in this position?/I'm the one/Who's always been/So calm so cool/No lover's fool/Running every show/He scares me so.

I remember when Jesus Christ Superstar opened on Broadway in 1971 and was condemned by many in the religious establishment as sacrilegious. Why? For getting it right? Here is a story of redemption wrapped inside a story in which we are all exposed in our hypocrisy. We need forgiveness therefore we fear forgiveness. We want it on our terms, and we want to decide who deserves it and who doesn't.

The most God-like thing any human being ever does is to forgive someone. It has nothing to do with approving of, or ignoring, or explaining away the sin. It has to do with confronting it honestly and then being for someone else the conduit of grace.

There is a haunting line buried in this text, right near the end. Jesus says, "the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little." That is not a call for us all to become notorious sinners so that we may be forgiven a lot and therefore love a lot. You know, Paul dealt with this criticism. People said, Hey, if forgiveness is unlimited, why not sin a whole bunch so that grace may abound? Why not party hearty and then repent at the 11th hour?

What Jesus is saying, I think, is that there is a mysterious equation to the spiritual life. If you don't know that you stand in need of forgiveness, how can you offer it to another? If you don't know how much you need it, how can you possibly recognize the joy that comes when others who need it receive it? And if you try to calculate who deserves it and who doesn't, you are playing God, and bad happen when people try to play God.

Now, just in case we think everyone left the party redeemed by the seminar on forgiveness, notice the closing but very revealing line after Jesus says again to the woman, "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?'

They still don't get it. We still don't get it. God forgives. We just pass the word along — that is, if we can get out of our own way long enough to let God be God.

In Luke's gospel, the ministry of Jesus is just beginning. And how do we know? A notorious sinner is walking away from a dinner party to which

she was not invited forgiven, believing in herself for the first time. And meanwhile, she leaves behind the first-century equivalent of the House Subcommittee on Table Manners and Boy/Girl Do's and Don'ts — and they are just not sure what the world is coming to.

After all, what good does it do to be first in line, if God starts serving from the back of the line?

Pastoral Prayer for Sunday, June 13, 2010

Lord of Life, help us to wake up and to understand what it means to be faithful people in our time. We are constantly judging others to be deficient, but we do not recognize our own failures. We expect to receive forgiveness if needed, but we aren't so certain that others deserve it, especially if their sins are worse than ours. I mean, don't there have to be standards when it comes to forgiveness? You can't just go around forgiving everyone, can you? What about the rules? What about consequences? What about personal responsibility?

We are a strange people Lord. Have mercy on us. Recently a pitcher who plays a game called baseball (well, of course, you know about baseball, a most holy game), almost threw a perfect game – quite the coveted accomplishment, and rare. But an umpire made the wrong call. All the instant replays (which as you know we have now Lord), proved it. He was wrong, and he deprived the pitcher of this rare and coveted accomplishment.

And so the umpire did a strange thing. He apologized. And the pitcher did an even stranger thing. He accepted the apology and forgave him. And it confused everyone, and need we say anything more?

Come to us, abide with us, and teach us the greatest lesson of the faith – how to forgive, and why we stand in need of forgiveness ourselves.

Amen.



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