

Text: But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.

I have come to the conclusion that I would never, *ever*, invite Jesus to eat at my house. Think about it: he enters this man's house at the man's invitation, and then proceeds to insult him. I don't know how Mary would have felt about this, but *my* mother raised me not to do such things! So here is the reason why Jesus would not be welcome at my house: he does not follow the accepted norms and mores of culture; you cannot trust him not to go *out of bounds* and call people to task *in their own house!* You cannot trust him to do what is right.

Let me take a moment and explain Jewish culture of that time period. First, the man who invited Jesus was a Pharisee. Pharisees, although not clergy, were deeply religious people, profoundly committed to living in the way of God. To make a long story short, and to simplify matters a bit, Pharisees believed that God kept a ledger for each individual's life. Sins were entered into the debit side and goodly deeds entered into the credit side (this is why Jesus' parable of the creditor with two debtors makes so much sense in this story: Simon knew exactly what Jesus was talking about). Pharisees believed that they had found a way to stack the credit side of the ledger. You did this by *following the rules*. And they had a rule for everything. For example, the scripture says that you may not work on the Sabbath, but what happens if you need to draw water from a well—is that work? The Pharisee would say that you must not exceed a certain number of steps to get to the well, and you must not exceed a certain number of hand pulls on the rope. Over a certain number of either and it was work and you should not do it. Twenty-nine steps to the well and it's not work—chalk one up on the credit side. Thirty steps and it is work, and therefore a sin—chalk one up on the debit side. I know this sounds extreme, but please try to hear it as an attempt by someone to take seriously what it means to be religious, to follow God's Law, *and to act accordingly*. It is such a person who has invited Jesus to supper.

One more point before: in Jesus's day when you invited people into your home there were three things that you did to welcome your guests. First, you washed their feet: they had been walking in sandals on the dusty, rocky roads, and washing their feet was a gracious act. Second, you greeted them with a kiss, to show your welcome. Third, you anointed their head with a drop of oil and herbs (I am not sure why, but I think it may have had something to do with the fact that people didn't bathe all that much).

That's all well and good, but where did the woman come from? Certainly Simon, being a good Pharisee, would not invite a sinner into his clean home. Actually, he didn't. The home was probably built around a central courtyard. On pleasant evenings dinner is taken outside in the courtyard itself; you still see this in many Mediterranean cultures. When such a celebrity as Jesus is in town and at such a meal it would be usual for the people of the village to gather around the periphery to see the famous person and listen to the dialogue. Okay, but was this woman actually under the table kissing Jesus's feet? No. Meals were taken while reclining on a small couch or mat, with one's feet off to the side our out behind. The woman simply needed to come up behind Jesus, just as the text says, to be able to minister to his feet, as it were. That is the tableau.

Simon witnesses this sinful woman's ministrations and, frankly, is appalled. He knows who and what kind of woman this is and if Jesus were indeed a prophet he would know, too, and therefore not allow her to touch him. Actually, it wouldn't take a prophet to figure this out: she

unbound her hair, after all. This would be today's equivalent of baring her chest. Outside of French beaches at the time, letting your hair down just wasn't done. She was way out of bounds of normally accepted behavior. As safe as it is to hear this story in church nearly 2,000 years later, the reality of what happened slaps morality across the face. Just imagine being someplace publically when a woman took off her dress and started washing someone's feet. Not only were the people present at the dinner aghast at what happened, those to whom this story was told must have been aghast. There's no way to gussy this up to make it look like something other than it was: an act that was so far outside the norm as to be scandalous. This woman was out of bounds. AND SO WAS JESUS.

Simon reacts as we would expect any good, church-going type to react, and in so doing he reveals the entire basis of his theology in one quick thought muttered under his breath, "If this man were a prophet he would know who and what kind of woman this was who is touching him, that she is a sinner." FULL STOP. This tells you exactly what Simon believes and reveals his conception of God. One, good people don't associate with bad people (enter one on the credit side), because you make yourself unclean by association if you do (enter one on the debit side). Two, righteousness and goodness condemn sinfulness (definite points on the credit side). Three, God condemns sinners so we should, too (more credits). Four, we are like God if we, too, condemn sinners (even more on the credit side). I am reminded of the time I watched a televangelist condemning people who sin. While holding a leather bound bible in his hands and thrusting it forward during the judgment parts of his diatribe he would scream, "And all you people who do sin [bible thrust forward here] *God is going to get you!*" Those who were sinners, at least in his opinion, were not welcome. God was condemning them, so he was condemning them, too. Because they are out of bounds.

It's right here where Jesus gets rude, where he goes out of bounds. He tells the parable of the two debtors and the generous creditor. Simon judges rightly that the one forgiven more will love the creditor more. Then Jesus lays into Simon big time. "You didn't wash my feet. You didn't give me a kiss of welcome. You didn't anoint my head with oil. And yet this 'sinner,' has welcomed me more graciously than you, and this is not even her own house." Now if I ever did something like Jesus did my mother would be very upset with me. "Yes," she would say to me, "Simon may have been rude in failing to follow the usual standards of hospitality, he may even have been deliberately insulting. But two wrongs don't make a right and it is always rude to insult someone, especially someone in whose house you are a guest. That's out of bounds." Mothers aside, it was an audacious thing for Jesus to do. The text does not tell us what happened at this point, but I suspect the dinner party went downhill pretty fast.

And Jesus now makes his point, and it is one of the most radical and jarring things he says in his ministry. The sinner loves more than the righteous. Loves who more? God. This is out of bounds. This is way out of bounds, because it turns conventional thinking entirely on its head and shatters any notion we have that going to church makes us closer to God. It doesn't, Jesus says. In fact, going to church may have the potential to *separate* us from God. Hans Küng writes:

What is it really that stands between God and people? Paradoxically, it is people's own morality and piety: their ingeniously devised moralism and their selective technique of piety. It is not the tax swindlers who find it most difficult to repent, not being able to remember all those whom they have cheated or how much they would have to restore.

No: it is the devout who find it most difficult, being so sure of themselves that they have no need of conversion. They became Jesus' worst enemies. Most of the sayings on judgment in the Gospels apply to these, not to the great sinners. Those who finally sealed his fate were not murderers, cheats, swindlers and adulterers, but the highly moral people. They thought in this way they were doing a service to God.

Thomas Merton is even more blunt. He writes, "When will we learn that 'being good' may mean having the mentality of a 'Christ killer?'"

These thoughts are, in and of themselves, sobering: that it is we good people who work *against* God. But there is another side to it that I had not realized until I prayed with this passage using Lectio Divina. In Lectio stage three is that portion of the prayer session where we focus in on our own feelings and articulate them to God. As I dropped into a state of prayer and tried to "get in touch with my feelings" I was very startled by something. It was as if I was experiencing the feelings of someone else. In this case, the feelings of the "sinful" woman. I was startled by this because I was trying to figure out how I feel, and yet God clearly was using this portion of the prayer to communicate something to me, as a minister, that I was missing, and which was crucial that I get. The feeling of the woman that came to me was that of frustrated helplessness. Here she was in this "righteous" person's house and she had to go beyond the boundaries of decency simply to have access to God. Because she was a sinner the "righteous" judged that she was unclean and not welcome where God's name was invoked. *Because she was a sinner, she was denied the very thing that could save her: standing in the presence of God.*

It is here that Jesus shows us a different view of God. Not a God who condemns, but instead who forgives. Not a God who rejects, but instead a God who welcomes. Not a God who wants it to be more difficult to come into the divine presence, but a God who will send Christ to open his arms wide upon the cross so that all might come within that saving embrace. Simon condemned because he thought in that way he was being like God. Jesus forgave, welcomed and loved, because in that way he WAS God: a perfect reflection of the divine image which is in every human being.

This passage has forced me to realize that if there is someone in that story I want to emulate, or should emulate, it is the sinful woman. And no, not in the sin, but in the recognition of my own sin; and in having the courage, of bringing that before God and asking forgiveness. Because unless I do that, I will never be the kind of loving person I want to be. Unless I do that I will be stuck loving little while congratulating myself on my piety. Unless I do what the woman had the courage to do—literally to stand naked and vulnerable before others and Christ, just as I am, I will never grow into the image of God in which I was created.

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Grace is such a blessed thing. Without it we might go throughout our entire lives thinking we were right all the time. And that's not a fate we should wish on anybody. Amen and amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Before you, O God, we stand and pray. Before you, we lift up our voices in praise and thanksgiving. Before you, we bring our fears, our hopes, our sorrows, our delight, our brokenness and our blessing.

Hear us, O Holy One, and hear the voices of all your children calling you by many names. Hear us, O Holy One, and reveal your presence among us as you revealed it to Moses and to Miriam, to Solomon, to Hagar and Sarah and Mary.

Hear us first as we pray for others: Hear also these our prayers for others: for Marion Taylor's brother, in whose honor the flowers have been given; for those who are ill and need healing: especially, Judy, Karen, Braxton, Loretta and Harris, and for those who care for them; and for all those who need our prayers, be they in joy or in sorrow.

O God, hear these prayers which thy faithful people gathered here offer unto thee, in silent petition: [SILENCE].

O God, your infinite care embraces the small, the broken, and the oppressed. When our brother sat at table in the house of Simon, a woman came to him and ministered to him with her sorrow and her grace. Although others judged her a sinner and unworthy, through Jesus you blessed her, accepting her gifts and her strength and her courage. When Jesus went on through the cities to preach and to teach, among his companions were women whose ministry enabled and empowered him.

Open our eyes to our pervasive self-righteousness (the arrogance of Simon) and replace it with the humility that sees our own sins with a repentant heart and the sins of our sisters and brothers with true compassion. Then open our eyes to the gifts, the courage and the strength, of our sisters and brothers--even those our culture claims are unworthy--teaching us to bless them and uphold them in their service. Finally, bring us to the unselfconscious generosity of spirit of the woman in the house of Simon so that we may minister to the whole family of creation with both sorrow and abundance, with repentance and joy, with our tears and our wealth.