

Entertaining Jesus

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Luke 7:36-8:3

A friend of mine chuckled when he saw the sermon title. Is “entertaining” a verb, whereby we are attempting to provide our Lord an enjoyable social experience? Or is “entertaining” an adjective, whereby we expect Jesus to tell us some witty stories or do some card tricks or sing a few songs at the piano? It is neither. And it is more.

In fact, the better word is *hospitality*, but hospitality at a much deeper level than which fork to use or a fancy recipe from *Gourmet* magazine. Hospitality as a spiritual practice, as a core activity of the church. The radical act of graciously welcoming the other, even the stranger and outcast, especially the stranger and outcast. And the reminder, always, that when we welcome Jesus, we welcome the stranger, and when we welcome the stranger, we welcome Jesus.

A Pharisee invites Jesus to dinner. This is no ordinary invitation, but an invitation saturated with implication. The Pharisees are the religious leaders, the religious establishment, and they have been watching Jesus warily as he defies convention. He has been saying troubling things and he has been doing troubling things and because the Pharisees are among the guardians of the status quo, we know they are troubled.

So a dinner invitation to Jesus is not so much, we presume, a friendly overture, but a litmus test. We don't know the Pharisee's motivations from the start, true. Yet it's fair to read some motivation into this, and it's fair, I believe, to think that Jesus knows fully what he is walking into. Yet walk into it he does. Jesus shows up and sits down.

Remember that this was a different environment in so many ways, and so we don't know how word travelled, but it did, and so a woman in the city learned that Jesus was dining at the unnamed Pharisee's home. This story is as much about her as the two men. She remains unnamed as well, but she does not remain unlabeled. The story calls her a “sinner.”

There is so much to unpack there. This is a week, a historic week in many ways (a woman nominated as a major party presidential candidate), a troubling week in other ways (news from Stanford), when women, and gender, and politics and ethics have been in the news.

While the story does not identify her sin, the implication is that it is of a sexual nature. And because social patterns were what they were, she enters the home, uninvited, part, no doubt,

of a kind of audience observing the dinner, observing the interaction between Jesus and his host.

Something remarkable happens. She has brought a jar of ointment, a costly thing. She was weeping, inexplicably, weeping from sadness, from joy, from vulnerability, from deep fatigue. We do not know, and we must be fair to her, but because the details of the story are absent, we are invited to fill them in. With her tears, she bathed Jesus' dirty and dusty feet, and dried them with her hair, and poured the ointment on his feet, an intimate act followed by an intimate act followed by an intimate act, in front of the crowd. It is extraordinary.

Then the litmus test for Jesus kicks in. The Pharisee, watching all of this, said that if Jesus were really a prophet, that is, if he really possessed divine and mystical powers, he would have known who this woman was. That is to say...if Jesus were a prophet, he would have known this woman was a sinner, a committer of some kind of immoral acts, repeatedly, regularly. And had Jesus known that, the moment she began to touch his feet, he would have put an end to the whole unseemly mess. That's what Jesus would have done, according to his legalistic and judgmental host.

That is not what Jesus did, as we know. Rather than taking the bait, and turning the evening into a trial either of his behavior or hers, he becomes a kind of mirror to his host. He first tells a little parable, about two people in debt, one for a little and one for a lot. The debts are cancelled, and Jesus affirms that the one whose debt was greater would feel the most gratitude. We get that, right? But we also wonder where this is going. We learn. He compares the behavior of the woman and his dinner host. She showed me great hospitality with her tears, with her ointment, with her compassion. You, sir, did none of that, but rather were waiting for the moment to trip me up and prove not only your religious superiority, but my scandalous lack of religious propriety.

It gets better. Of the woman, he says "her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little." Then he said to her, "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?" And he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

This is a story about many things. It is a story about hospitality, again, not about folding napkins and place settings, but about welcome and inclusion, and more than that. It is a story about finding a place in your heart, an open place, to be welcomed.

Three people in this story.

- The Pharisee, who should understand all of this as his tradition is steeped in it, misses the mark because he interprets his tradition legalistically and not gracefully.
- The woman, with no identified religious affiliation, and certainly without any standing or status, has made an open place in her heart, in the face of her tears, in the face of her status, to provide hospitality in a place to which she was not even invited.
- And Jesus, the bridge to all of this, serves as a mirror for the Pharisee and his inhospitality, and serves as a window to the woman so she can see into her own heart even as she tends to Jesus'. Jesus graciously accepts what the woman has to offer, which is an act of hospitality in and of itself.

Sometimes we have trouble giving. Sometimes we have trouble receiving. Jesus does both here, in a radical way, and in so doing models for us what grace looks like.

All around us, people are different from us. Physically, emotionally, economically, experientially. That is how it should be, diversity as a gracious gift from God. Where we make the mistake, where the church makes a mistake, where culture does as well, is in making differences defining segregating.

Jesus will have none of it. Time after time he demonstrates barrier-breaking, boundary shattering behavior that names people as he beloved children of God that they are and therefore leaves the status quo trembling in the implications.

It goes both ways – giving and receiving. Once the Pharisee realizes how unwelcome and inhospitable his heart has been, he will receive the truly radical hospitality of Jesus, even as he welcomes the woman into his home, into his faith, into his heart.

Kathleen Norris writes that “True hospitality is marked by an open response to the dignity of each and every person.”

Letty Russell writes that “Hospitality is the practice of God's welcome by reaching across difference to participate in God's actions bringing justice and healing to our world in crisis.”

Lauren Winner writes “We are not meant simply to invite people into our homes, but also to invite them into our lives. Having guests and visitors, if we do it right, is not an imposition, because we are not meant to rearrange our lives for our guests - we are meant to invite our guests to enter into our lives as they are. It is this forging of relationships that transforms entertainment... into hospitality...”

All of that has implications for how we live our lives, each of us. And it has implications for how we live as a church community, how we welcome people to worship, how we welcome our

guests seeking food and shelter, how we welcome people who look like us and act like us and how look or act nothing like us.

This kind of hospitality, I believe, is our growing edge and our great opportunity. It is about building relationships, about recognizing our dual roles as guests in God's house and hosts to one another. It is about making true space, that as we welcome others, we find ourselves ever closer to God. Amen.