

Look Who Came To Dinner

June 16, 2013

Luke 7:37 - 8:3

We open most of our worship services here by saying, "In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." Through this act we call upon the name of Christ for his presence to be with us during our worship, remembering that he said, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there I will be also."

Christ has been with us through our opening prayer, the hymn, the anthem, the scripture readings, and now, as we settle back to hear his word proclaimed in this sermon. But don't get too comfortable because His word can challenge you, can confront you, can upset you as well as comfort you, console you and bring you peace.

I'm going to ask you to summon up all your creative powers and imagine Christ here with us physically this morning. Please focus over there beside the lectern. Focus with all your psychic energy. Focus there and imagine that you begin to see the form of a man, a man in dazzling white, a man who becomes clearer with each passing second. The image remains clouded, but there you can see an image of Christ. Christ is truly present with us this morning.

As you focus on that image, I need to tell you that something very peculiar is taking place in the back of the church. Don't turn around. Focus on Christ. A lady is entering the church. She is wearing rags. She is slipping in as quietly as possible so no one will notice. Her appearance tells us she is poor. She walks with a cane and is visibly weak. She shakes as she sits. Her clothing wreaks of dirt and grime. She is, as we would say, from the wrong side of the tracks.

Now continue to focus on Christ standing there by the lectern. The woman looks to the front and sees image of Christ. She sees Christ, and as she does rises from her seat and begins a slow walk to the front.

You want to stay focused on Christ, but you cannot. You turn. You look. You see this woman approach Christ. You gasp. You wonder how she could dare approach him in such rags, with such a miserable life.

She sees your stares, she can almost read your mind as she continues her slow walk to the steps of the chancel.

Many of you are thinking, how did she get in here. Where did you come from? How can we let a woman like that in our church?

She knows what you are thinking but still she comes. As she approaches closer to the steps her pace quickens.

You focus again on Christ. What will be His reaction to this woman? How will He respond?

She reaches Christ. She falls on her knees at his feet, lying on those steps. Tears are running from her eyes. She lifts her head, and smiles at Him. Her tears are making drops of water on his feet. She uses her hair to wipe them away. She stays there at His feet, crying joyous tears. She doesn't move. She doesn't seem afraid of Him. She seems perfectly comfortable, perfectly at peace.

Focus on Christ. Christ lifts His head and looks at you. His smile turns to a frown.

He addresses us saying: "I have been present with you since the prelude. My spirit has been here with you and I have felt your worship. You have been polite but you have not rejoiced in your hearts at my presence with you.

As I became clearer, as you focused on me, I felt a strange fear, as if you didn't know how to be at peace in my presence. I saw the shock, the wonderment in your minds as the woman came forward.

She came out of love, out of a joyous heart because she had heard me preach the good news and had to come and find me to share her joy, to share her love, to express her thankfulness at being released from sin and beginning a new life with me. This woman has great love. "I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much."

As you focus on the image of Christ with the woman lying at his feet it begins to fade. It blurs, it becomes fainter and fainter. It is gone. You are left with a strange feeling in your heart. You wonder. You think, could it happen? And if it did, how would I react? How do I feel in the presence of Christ? How do I feel about that woman? Can I rejoice and feel happy because Christ is my Lord?

That little adventure in our imagination sets the tone for this sermon. Many of us as we read today's gospel lesson can relate to two of those figures, some to Simon the Pharisee, others to the woman. I want to briefly explore how we feel about those two people and which one we relate to.

Simon invited Jesus to his house after church because he wanted to learn more about this Christ. At the same time he wanted Christ to see Him as a righteous man who follows the letter of the law to perfection. Simon was filled with self-pride, self-righteousness. There was no one better than he and he wanted Christ to see that. He wanted to show off his faith to Christ. He is like the frog in the following:

"Two ducks and a frog became good friends one summer as they swam together in a farmer's pond. As the summer days became hotter and hotter, the pond began to dry up. The ducks could easily fly to another pond, but what of the poor frog? He had an idea. The ducks could carry a stick between them as they flew and the frog could hang onto the stick with his mouth. They all agreed it could work and the frog felt especially proud that he solved the problem.

As they took off in this manner, the farmer saw them and was amazed. "How clever," he shouted. "Who thought of that?"

The frog filled with pride and being quite pleased with himself opened his mouth to say, "I did." And that was the end of the frog."

Many times when people come into the presence of Christ, all they can think of is their self-pride, their self-righteousness, They want Christ to see how very good they think they are. Simon was like that. Many Christians are like that. However, this self-pride gets in the way of a close relationship with Christ .

Simon also had another problem as he saw this woman coming into the presence of Jesus. He had a holier than thou attitude. He judged this woman by his standards. Simon might have said to himself, "I have never engaged in the kinds of sins committed by this woman who is sitting at Jesus' feet." And by the way, we aren't told specifically what these sins were. Jesus just said, "they are many."

So Simon might have been thinking something like, "I am not as bad as this woman and in fact I am not as bad as 90% of the people in my town.

Don't we do the same? As you imagined that woman walking down our aisle, wasn't the first emotion you had of judgment? Wondering why she was here? Or how could she come here in the presence of Christ like that?

Jesus saw through Simon's mask of self-righteousness and made Simon uneasy with the parable of the forgiveness of debt. He made Simon understand that all people need the forgiveness of God, those with few sins and those with a lot.

How many of us could relate to that woman in the gospel story or the imaginary woman walking down our aisle?

Many have tried to explain the sin of that woman, but in reality that doesn't matter, what does matter is the fact that the woman felt the forgiving power of Christ in her life. She felt the love of Christ and she wanted to respond in any way she could. Her love for Christ was not duty, but gracious love, a overflowing thanksgiving for the freedom she felt. She couldn't help herself as she was drawn to Christ.

Someone once said, 'I want a religion that can speak to me when I have been a real stinker."

And Christ does speak to us in that condition and says we are forgiven.

A man in retirement decided to visit as many cemeteries as possible to see the uniqueness of the tombstones. After his travel, he put together a slide show of the many unique tombstones he found.

At each show, someone would ask what was the most impressive one. He always saved the answer to last. He would have the lights turned completely off, he would dramatically build the audience curiosity then he would show the slide. It was a very simple tombstone barely a foot tall.

On it the inscription said one word: "Forgiven"

Although it was the realization of her sinfulness that led the woman in our gospel lesson to understand that she could not make things right with God on her own, it was the promise of forgiveness that moved her to throw herself at Jesus' feet. While this sinful woman was at Jesus' feet she heard words of forgiveness.

You see, when it comes to sin and our relationship with God, Simon the Pharisee was miles from the truth. Yes, some may break more of God's commandments more frequently than others. In this parable Jesus used a multiple of ten. One man owed the banker five hundred denari and the other owed fifty. Maybe the sinful woman committed ten times as many sins as Simon. The whole town perhaps could have testified to that fact.

But whether a person has sinned a few times or many times, publicly or privately, they have accumulated a debt that they cannot pay! As Jesus said of the two debtors, "Neither of them had the money to pay him back."

Simon's outwardly good life was not enough to set things right with God. He had a lot more in common with the woman he was calling sinful than he wanted to admit. As do we. Again, we don't know what this woman did. People have guessed or assumed, but we don't know. But even if we've never done anything close to what she did, we can't make the mistake Simon was making - thinking that we're relatively good or that our good works make us right with God.

But there was hope for Simon the Pharisee just as there was hope for the sinful woman and as there is hope for you and me. Remember what Jesus said of the moneylender in the parable, "Neither one of the debtors had the money to pay him back, so he canceled the debts of both." That is a beautiful picture of God's undeserved love. He canceled the debt of the sinful woman. He canceled the debt of Simon the Pharisee. He has canceled your debt and mine.

So look who came to dinner. Look who crashed the party. Someone who knew that she needed Jesus, and she came to him. She realized the emptiness in her life. She brought her sins in repentance, she heard words of forgiveness and she offered herself for service. Because she believed. What she believed in we call grace.

There was a seminary professor who had a practical way of illustrating to his students the concept of grace. At the end of his evangelism course he would distribute the final exam with the caution to read it all the way through before beginning to answer it. This caution was written on the exam as well. As the students read the test, it became unquestionably clear to each of them that they had not studied nearly enough.

The further they read, the worse it became. About halfway through, audible groans could be heard through out the lecture hall. On the last page, however, was a note that read, "You have a choice. You can either complete the exam as given or sign your name at the bottom and in so doing receive an A for this assignment."

Wow? The students sat there stunned. "Was he serious? Just sign it and get an A?" Slowly, the point dawned on them, and one by one they turned in their papers and silently filed out of the room.

A member of that class, Charles Stanley, talked with the professor about it later on, and the professor shared some of the reactions he had received through the years. Some students began to take the exam without reading it all the way through, and they would sweat it out for the entire two hours of class time before reaching the last page.

Others read the first two pages, became angry, turned the test in blank, and stormed out of the room without signing it. They never realized what was available, and as a result, they lost out totally.

One fellow, however, read the entire test, including the note at the end, but decided to take the exam anyway. He did not want any gifts; he wanted to earn his grade. And he did. He made a C+, but he could easily have had an A.

This story illustrates many people's reaction to God's solution to sin. Some people look at God's standard--moral and ethical perfection--and throw their hands up in surrender. Why even try? they tell themselves. I could never live up to all that stuff

Others are like the student who read the test through and was aware of the professor's offer but took the test anyway. Unwilling to simply receive God's gift of forgiveness, they set about to rack up enough points with God to earn it.

But God's grace truly is like the professor's offer. It may seem unbelievable, but if we accept it, then, like the stunned students who accepted the professor's offer, like the woman who came to dinner, we, too, will discover that, Yes, God's grace truly is free. All we have to do is accept it.

We can't buy it, we can't earn it. But if we humbly come to Christ with true repentance, as the woman in our lesson did, it is ours for the asking. Thanks be to God!