

The infinitely radical hospitality of God

Pentecost 4 – Year C – June 17, 2007

Christ Episcopal Church, Poughkeepsie, New York

1 Kings 21:1-21a – Psalm 5:1-8 – Galatians 2:15-21 – Luke 7:36-8:3

Jesus responded as God always responds. The response was the life-giving, eternal and infinitely radical hospitality of God.

Many of us begin our reflections on this story by identifying with the ‘noble but fallen woman’ over and against the ‘arrogant and prideful Pharisee.’ Starting at such a place probably says a great deal more about us, then it does about the story as Luke has given it to us in his gospel.

We are told that the woman who approaches Jesus is a sinner. What type of sinner might she be? We are given no clue whatsoever the she was a prostitute, or that her sin was in any way sexual. Yet that is the conclusion to which many of us immediately jump. Why do we reduce women to the state where their only sin involves their sexuality? Can a woman not be ill-tempered? Beat her children? Be a thief? A murderer? All we know is that she was a sinner. Just like each one of us.

All Pharisees were not bad guys. Many scholars believe that Jesus was likely to have been a Pharisee. He was far more likely to have been a Pharisee than a member of the community at Qumran.

Simon could just as likely have been a noble Pharisee, someone who tried his best to not only love God, but to also love his neighbor as himself. He perhaps merely had a rather narrow view of the size of his neighborhood. The boundaries of his socio-theological-cultural neighborhood might simply have not included a place for a certain woman of the city, one known to be a sinner.

All that we really know is that he was a little quick to judge someone who was different than himself. Maybe a little bit like each one of us. All that we know is that he was a sinner. Just like the rest of us.

So there is Jesus, the guest at a dinner party given by a sinner, and a gate-crashing woman, also a sinner.

In this story about table fellowship we experience another example of the great reversal that is so dominant in Luke’s gospel. When the woman of the city approaches the dinner table and touches

Jesus the entire panorama of 'clean and unclean' issues comes forward. To touch or to be touched by something or someone who was unclean under the Law was to become unclean yourself.

When Jesus, Simon the Pharisee, and all the other guests at the dinner party observed that a woman who was a known sinner touched Jesus, they knew that *under the Law*, Jesus was himself now unclean. But of course it never actually worked that way.

The ministry of Jesus utterly and complete reversed the pattern. When Jesus touched someone who was dead, they became alive. When Jesus touched a leper they became clean. When a woman who flowed blood for forty years touched Jesus, she became well.

The holiness and wholeness within the life of Jesus was more powerful than the uncleanness or 'unholiness' of the demon-possessed, a leper, a dead person, or even that certain woman of the city, a sinner, whom we meet today.

This story is one of so many in scripture that shows us with whom Jesus stands. Given the option to stand with the Law, or to stand with the sinner, Jesus always move to the sinner. This is where we not only read or hear, where we not only see, but where we actually experience, within our own lives, the beauty and the complexity of forgiveness, and of the grace of God. This sinful woman provides a simple example

and formula for how we might experience that same complexity of beauty, forgiveness and grace in our own lives.

Luke tells us that this woman anointed Jesus, bathed the feet of Jesus, and received forgiveness from Jesus We might be called to anoint Jesus when we encounter him in hospitals or nursing homes. We might be called to bathe the feet of Jesus when we meet him in jail or prison. We might be called to ask for forgiveness from Jesus when we find him hungry, or thirsty, or naked on the streets of Poughkeepsie.

The unnamed female sinner in this story expressed radical hospitality to Jesus when she anointed his feet with oil, bathed his feet with her tears, and dried his feet with her hair. Jesus responded as God always responds. The response was the life-giving, eternal and infinitely radical hospitality of God. Jesus acknowledged her gift, forgave her sins, and granted her peace.

It doesn't get much better than that.