

March 31

Sinners Welcomed

Luke 7:36-40, 15:1-10

Today we have two stories of Jesus interacting with the Pharisees. The first one was at dinner with Simon, a Pharisee, where a woman of ill repute crashes the party. The other was when he was teaching and the Pharisees interrupt him as they shared a familiar charge: “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.” With sinners and tax collectors gathering around to listen to him, Jesus could hardly deny it—and he didn’t want to. He embraced the “charge” with three vivid stories in which finding a lost sheep, a lost coin and a lost boy set off big celebrations. To the last story, he pointedly added an older son who didn’t want to welcome the lost boy home. We will talk about these lost ones in a few weeks. Today we will focus on that dinner at Simon’s.

We need to begin with a word about the Pharisees. Pharisees were a particular religious sect—like a denomination—within first century Judaism. There were not a lot of Pharisees—only 6,000 officially, according to first century Jewish historian Josephus. The Pharisees were respected by many, and their philosophy came to play a key role in later Judaism. The Pharisees were somebodies—respected rabbis, lawyers and religious leaders. The word Pharisee comes from an Aramaic word that we think means “separate” which, based upon what we know about them, seems to point towards their efforts at holiness. They were often zealous in their pursuit of the law, particularly the laws of purity. There are two inherent tendencies in a religion that is focused on holiness. This kind of faith tends to make religion all about rules as the way to please God. The rules sucked the life and joy out of faith. In pursuit of the letter of the law, they often forgot the spirit of the law. A second temptation for those whose religion is focused on holiness is self-righteousness. It becomes easy to judge everyone else in the light of your standards of holiness, which you assume are God’s standards. This led the Pharisees to label people “good” or “bad,” and they saw “bad people” as unlikely to change. This is why they grumbled when Jesus associated with sinners. This is why they were aghast when he let a woman with a tainted reputation touch him. He was being defiled by these sinners just by association. Jesus, on the other hand, saw people much more as “lost” (like the sheep, coin or boy), and what’s lost can be found.

Aren't you glad Jesus did not view us as a Pharisees might? Think about a time when you lost your way spiritually and needed finding? Aren't you glad that God wanted to find you? Even more, Jesus pictures God rejoicing each time a heart responds to God's love and is found! We are not labeled as sinners without hope of redemption.

Let's go back to that first banquet to experience more fully Jesus' understanding of grace. Luke loves to show the contrasts between the somebodies and the nobodies. Jesus is having supper at the home of a pious religious leader when a woman walked into the Pharisee's dining room, and she stood at Jesus' feet, which were stretched out behind him. Luke 7:36 tells us that Jesus reclined at Simon's table which was usual. She had learned that Jesus was there, and she's come to see him. We know nothing of what had happened before this, but we can surmise that Jesus had offered her grace, or shown her some kindness, or healed her of some disease. Luke simply doesn't tell us. But she's come to bless him, bringing with her an alabaster flask containing costly perfume. Mark and John, in a similar story, say the flask held nard. If so, it was worth about one year's wages for an average day laborer.

Luke tells us she was a woman of the city who was a sinner. This is a euphemism, most scholars believe, for a prostitute. Can you see this—the self-righteous Pharisee who seeks to remain pure and holy, inviting his pious friends to dinner to hear from the rabbi everyone was talking about having this woman enter his private rooms. How scandalous that she sets foot in his home. Can you feel his discomfort and that of all of the other separated ones in the house? Now, I want you to imagine the woman for a moment. No woman grows up hoping to be a prostitute. She had hopes and dreams at one time, first century equivalents of a white picket fence, a family, loved and being treasured by someone. Was she sold into slavery by her father as a girl? This happened at that time. Was she rejected by a man and left with no other source of income, financially required to sell herself? We don't know how she came to be a prostitute. I wonder if you can see this woman, trembling, as she walks into the room? Seeing Jesus, she looks down, refusing to look at the room full of rabbis whose eyes are all upon her. This woman wept. Seeing her tears on Jesus' dusty feet, she let down her hair—something proper women wouldn't do in a setting like this—and she knelt and dried his feet with her hair, kissing his feet, and then breaking open the seal of her

alabaster jar, poured this beautifully scented oil on his feet. This is an amazing scene of great love, a year's wages poured out on Jesus. The gratitude and love she demonstrated take your breath away—unless you are Simon. We read, “Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, ‘If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him—that she is a sinner.’”

Jesus tells Simon a parable about two men who both had their debts paid off—one owed two months wages, the other two years wages. He asks Simon, “Which will love the one who cancelled the debts more?” Simon said, “The one who had the greater debt.” “That’s right Simon.” Then Jesus turned towards the women and said to Simon, “Do you see this woman?” Simon could only see the woman’s sin. Jesus saw her as a person, as a child of God. He saw her as someone’s daughter. He saw her as someone who had made bad decisions, but who was still a sheep of God’s flock. He had compassion upon her and wanted her to return to God. This is what Jesus said he came for, “To seek and to save those who are lost.” Simon could only see her sin. Jesus is telling us that God sees us. Even with all of our sin, God sees us. And how does God see us? God sees us as God’s children, as those God loves and longs to welcome home. God sees what we were meant to be.

What does our scripture story about the Pharisee and the Prostitute tell you about God? About what God wants and offers to you?

First of all, I hear that we are challenged to not label people as sinners or outcasts. Jesus’ words to Simon are still words for us. “Do we see them?” Do we see those on the margins as people beloved by God or do we put them into categories, negative categories. Jesus asks us to see them as people that God loves. Yes, they may be lost but there is hope for them. God seeks the lost. What is our role in helping them to find a new path, to find God?

Second, there are words of hope for us. Sometimes we get confused, tempted, angry and more. Some might see us as sinners. Jesus, in these stories reminds us that God does not reject us. That we too can find our way back to God.

We don't like to see ourselves this way. We want to believe that because we go to church, read our Bibles and pray that we are better than those others. We want to believe that God loves us more than them. We don't even necessarily want to be around them. Do you hear a bit of Pharisee thinking in what I just said? Unfortunately, it can be a part of our faith life even to this day. This story reminds us to not be self-righteous.

Third, we are reminded to see people, really see them. We are to associate with them. We should be scolded by our friends for hanging out with the wrong kind of people!! Jesus was criticized for the company he kept. He was with people the religious elite deemed offensive because he cared about them, wanted them to know that God loves them and, if they were lost, to offer them a message of hope.

The church has always struggled against Pharisee thinking. There are people who want to proclaim that only certain people are acceptable to God. Others are second class citizens. They are sinners especially if they do not accept their place. We have perpetuated these beliefs over time concerning race, consigning people of color to second class status. We have downplayed the role of women in the church, sometimes being told that it is a sin to accept them into positions of leadership. We struggle today with these issues surrounding care for the migrant and the place of GBLT folk in our midst. These stories leave us to ponder the question: "What kind of church would God have us be?" Again, think of the meal. We have the Pharisees and the Prostitute. Who ended up being the somebody, and who ended up being the nobody in the eyes of God? My invitation to you today is twofold: To receive God's mercy, to come home to him if you are lost. And to be the kind of church that sees all people as beloved and shows up with welcome signs when lost sheep come home.