

## **When Pharisees Give Dinner Parties**

Luke 7:36-8:3

The first time we took Beth Trick-or-Treating she was two or three, and at the first house we went to I realized that it isn't a skill kids are born with. We rang the doorbell, and when the door opened Beth just stood there, silent. "What do you say?" I prompted her. "May I come in?" she asked.

I was slightly embarrassed, but frankly pleased to see that the idea of good manners and hospitality had sunk in deeper than all the hype about Halloween. Most of us try hard to raise our children to value and demonstrate good manners, not so they come across polished and refined, but because the true purpose of etiquette is to make people feel comfortable and welcome. It is our most basic form of hospitality; an invitation into our lives as well as our homes.

Unfortunately, we eventually learn that it's not always safe, inviting people in. After an outbreak of violence recently, churches are struggling with the tension between hospitality and security. CraigsList now posts warnings advising people to meet in public places to buy and sell, not in your home. Sometimes inviting people in is inviting trouble.

Someone probably should have warned the Pharisee that it isn't even safe inviting Jesus into your home. Your life won't be in danger, not like inviting in a vampire or sociopath with weapons and a grudge; it's more like the time we inadvertently let a squirrel into our house and some serious mischief and mayhem ensued. Jesus can do that, you know, cause mischief and mayhem, and usually when you least expect it.

If you asked the Pharisee, he would probably have said that the problems really began when the uninvited guest showed up, the woman. Notice I didn't use the word 'Lady' because everyone in town knew that that wasn't what she was. Luke doesn't spell out for us exactly what she did, but that's irrelevant. What matters is that everyone there knew exactly who and what she was. Like Rod Blagojevich or Heidi Fleiss, this woman's name was synonymous with scandal. She was a bad girl and everyone in town knew it, talked about it, shook their heads over it. And now a perfectly lovely dinner party was ruined because of the embarrassing scene she caused by pouring oil on Jesus' feet and towel drying them with her hair.

That would have been the Pharisee's take on it. But if you asked Jesus, he would have said that things were going along quite nicely until the Pharisee pitched a hissy fit about the foot washing business. Jesus wasn't concerned about the disrupted dinner party, or the etiquette violations that would have caused the Miss Manners of any culture, East or West, to have a conniption fit. What he was concerned about was the state of his host's heart and soul. And, as you've probably learned by now, if you let Jesus in, even just for a minute, he can't resist an opportunity to meddle in our spiritual lives.

In a nutshell, here's what was at the heart of the issue: everyone in town knew who and what the woman was. Her sin or sins were common knowledge. But the Pharisees' sin was a secret, probably even to himself. That's what made him think he was justified in believing he was

better than her. It's also what made it possible for him to have Jesus as a dinner guest, thinking that he was someone who was on equal footing with him. He probably invited Jesus over with the idea of an evening of invigorating conversation about scripture and the Law. As someone who was knowledgeable, engaging, and intellectually stimulating, even provocative, Jesus stirred up a lot of things in the Pharisee, but self-awareness was not one of them. There is nothing in this story to suggest that he felt one iota of shame or guilt when Jesus was around.

Or gratitude. Unlike the uninvited guest, neither tears nor gratitude flowed out of the Pharisee. To him Jesus was simply a pleasant, engaging, impressive guest. No one you needed to make a great fuss over, other than providing a good bottle of wine and a nice meal.

One of the things I have observed about religious art is that, if you set aside all of the paintings and sculptures of Jesus on the cross, or as an infant, nearly all of them show a gentle, kind, warm-hearted Jesus. Maybe not the kind of guy you'd want to spend a Friday night hanging out with, but you'd certainly go to him with your problems. Now I'm no artist, but if I were I'd show Jesus with the same expression on his face that my mom had when she wanted to make sure that I had gotten the point – eyebrows up, looking at me not quite straight on, but a little off to the side, head down just a little bit, maybe. You've probably seen or given the look yourself, right? It's that, "will we need to have this conversation again, young lady?" look.

I think that when Jesus wasn't looking at people all kindly and gently that he was looking at them like that, like when the disciples asked which one of them would be the greatest in heaven, or Peter asked if they could build little booths up on the mountain after the transfiguration. I think that's the look he gave the Pharisee after he told the parable about the two men who had been forgiven, one of a large offense, one of a small one, and after he had told the woman that her sins were forgiven, and she could go in peace. "Did you get that?" his look asked. Or maybe, "you need to go to your room and think about this one for a while, don't you?"

And I'm pretty sure that that's the look he gives us sometimes, too. Right after he looks at the Pharisee that way, he turns his head and gives it to us, too. "And what about you guys? Were you paying attention? Did you get that, too?"

And what is it that we are supposed to get? The point I think we are supposed to get is that we practice a rather furtive form of faith, so private and so secretive that we may even be fooling ourselves.

If you are 'fortunate' enough to be guilty of a non-gossip-worthy kind of sin, chances are good that no one but you will ever know about it. It can be your own little secret. If someone's running around with someone else's wife or has been embezzling money from the company, chances are everyone here's going to know about it. But when was the last time someone came up to you and told you that they were eating dinner at Ruby Tuesdays and saw with their very own eyes that one of the elders of the church was practicing gluttony? Have two or more elders ever come to your house to have a pastoral conversation with you about your aggressive driving? We don't talk about that kind of stuff, do we? You're probably safe if your downfalls don't fall into the illicit or lascivious behavior camps. In fact, your sin could be so secret you might not even be aware of it; when was the last time you lay in bed at night feeling sorrowful about your

carbon footprint, or the way your consumption habits contribute to poverty in developing nations?

At some point in time, maybe about the time we quit being Catholic and quit fencing the Table before communion, we lost two important spiritual disciplines: self-examination and confession. Feeling good about ourselves and having fun crowded out self-knowledge. When the rights and freedoms and privacy of the individual took precedence over the community, confession went out the window. Maybe those are two disciplines we need to revive. We are learning to share with each other the amazing things that God is doing in our lives, the ways we are seeing God at work, but maybe we also need to go one step further and trust each other with the burdens and guilt that we share. The temptations we struggle with and unhealthy behaviors we can't seem to break and hate in ourselves. Maybe we need to help each other own up to the sin and struggles that we all face, instead of trying to convince ourselves and everyone else how good and together we are.

Why? Why would good Presbyterians do such a radical, personal, thing? Because unless we understand who we are and what we have done, just how great our sin is, we'll never understand or appreciate just what Jesus did for us; how great his love and mercy are. If we don't know ourselves as sinners, then we won't know Jesus as savior; we'll make the mistake of inviting Jesus in as nothing more than a great and interesting man, someone challenging and stimulating and engaging; someone with whom we are on nearly equal footing. We'll be poor hosts to the Spirit of Christ, living inside us.

But even if we get self-examination and confession down, we need to go one step further, and this part we learn from that nameless, uninvited guest: extravagant, and yes, public gratitude. "What have you done for me?" Jesus asked his host. "This woman was so humbled and so grateful that she poured out her tears and her expensive oil, and used her hair to dry my feet. And she didn't care who saw it."

"What have you done for me?" Jesus asks his host, and then he turns to give us that same pointed look. "If you have taken a hard and honest look at yourselves and know who and what you are, then you also know what I have done for you, and if you know what I have done for you, then ask yourself this: how generous and effusive have your love and gratitude been? How have you poured out your devotion? How public and extravagant has your gratitude been?"

Yes, friends, this is a stewardship story. There is a direct correlation between what we give and how we give it, and the degree to which we are grateful to God. Nearly every year the Stewardship Committee assures you that we have a long-standing tradition of keeping pledges confidential. The session doesn't know how much you give, the pastor doesn't know how much you give, or even if you give. It is a policy that says that your giving is between you and God. It is a private, personal matter.

But if we give because we are grateful, and in proportion to the forgiveness and mercy and love we have received, what does that policy imply? What are we hiding? Is it that we don't want people to know what we give and do for God because we don't want them to know how great our sin is (that's if we give a lot)? Or maybe we want it kept private because, like the Pharisee,

we don't feel like we have much that we need to be forgiven for (that's if we don't give much)? Our giving – time, talents, money, everything – should be a visible, glad and generous proclamation of God's great mercy. It should almost be embarrassingly effusive, like pouring oil and tears over the feet of Jesus, lavishing our love on him without worrying about what people will think.

Now please don't get bogged down on the wrong thing here and think that the point I'm trying to make is that we should change our policy about pledges. I care about what you give, yes, not because the church needs it to meet the budget and to fund programs. I care about what you give of your time and your money because it is a sign of your spiritual health. It is a reflection of how crazy you are about God and your gratitude for what God has done for you. I love hearing your stories about the work you do for WNL! and Good Samaritan and IHN and The River because it encourages my faith – when you tell me about how you have carved out a chunk of time in your busy lives to do that, you are telling me how much God means to you. When you share your stories about tithing or trying to give more and trusting God to take care of you with what's left, you are telling me the gospel story, and how it has been made real in your lives. You aren't bragging or boasting, you are proclaiming the good news. You are preaching the gospel.

Enough with the private Christianity business; the furtive faith. We need to be honest about what God done for us, and what have we done for God, our gratitude for God. It is messy, risky business, sometimes, being faithful Christians, but it is also joyful and extravagant business.