

Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?

Gal. 2:15-21

Luke 7:36-8:3

Do you like dinner parties? I like dinner parties. I like to make the house look extra nice, buy some flowers, invite my friends over, enjoy good food and conversation. It's a lovely way to open your home and your heart and offer hospitality to others. Jesus apparently liked dinner parties too. It seems he went to quite a few of them. Some he even hosted—breakfast on the shore, dinner for a small crowd of 5,000, bread and wine for 12 of his closest friends. The Jesus we meet in the Gospels seems to enjoy his meals so much that he actually earns a reputation as glutton and drunkard.

Frequently Jesus dined at the home of Pharisees. Now Pharisees have gotten a bad rap over the years. We tend to equate Pharisees with the bad guys, those folks who were always trying to trap Jesus with their questions. But that's somewhat unfair. Fact is, the Pharisees were passionate followers of God's Word. They upheld the law and taught it others. They were the devout church-going people of their day—fundamentally religious upstanding citizens who kept the law—and they certainly weren't all out to get Jesus. Many liked him and even tried to protect him from those who did not. Many wanted to know more about this interesting upstart; they wanted to discover why so many people were following him. Maybe he was a modern prophet. What was it about him that was causing such a stir in the community? Let's have him to dinner. And so Jesus ends up eating on this particular day at the home of a Pharisee named Simon.

Imagine the setting: outside, under the breeze of the olive trees, in the shade.

There's a long low table laden with baked bread and fresh fruit and marinated vegetables, perhaps even some grilled fish or roast lamb. And the guests—who were probably all male—are reclining, as was the custom then, on couches around the table. Everything is perfect, all nice and kosher. Everyone is eating with the right hand and no one has had too much wine. We're past the initial pleasantries and the conversation is getting interesting. It's going to be a lovely evening. But guess who's coming to dinner?

Please pray with me:

God of amazing, abundant, lavish, extravagant and costly grace, be our host this morning. Feed our hungry souls from your Word. Forgive us, cleanse us, renew us and send us...in the name of the Father, and the Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

I don't know if we can possibly appreciate what courage it took—what boldness, what determination. We don't know what this woman did, the scripture doesn't tell us, but we do know what everybody else in town knew—she was a sinner. That meant she done something very publicly and very decidedly wrong. Some think she was a prostitute. Maybe she beat her children. Maybe she was an addict. Maybe she had failed to take care of her aging parents, as the law prescribed. We don't know. All we know is that everyone in town steered clear. She was welcome nowhere.

But somewhere along the way, she must have met Jesus. Some time before this evening, she had to have had a face-to-face encounter with the Son of God. She must have, because she had taken all her money, everything she had saved, and spent it on this alabaster jar of ointment, a perfumed exotic luxury. Even as she waited and watched the men around the table, she was enveloped by its heady scent.

She paused only for a moment, and then she slipped through the olive grove, stepped between the servants, and went straight to end of the couch where Jesus lay. Nobody stopped her nobody even noticed her. And before another second passed, she broke the seal on the flask and poured it, lavishly, exuberantly, extravagantly all over Jesus' dusty feet.

And as the oil gurgled out, out poured all her emotions with it: the pain and humiliation of her years of shame; the fear that she might even now be stopped from reaching Jesus; the deep, overflowing gratitude that in this man she had found forgiveness; the huge upwelling joy that for the first time in her life she had encountered authentic, abiding, abundant love. Her tears poured down and mingled with the perfume as they puddled on the couch, and so she uncovered her long hair and used it to wipe his feet, as she caressed them and covered them with her kisses.

Shocking, isn't it? Ridiculous behavior! Over the top. Inappropriate and vulgar ... and such a display of emotion—how embarrassing for the rest of us to have to watch! She doesn't belong here! She was not invited! She is way, **way** out of place! And what is Jesus doing? He's just lying there, watching her. He's made no move to stop her. He's enjoying it! Has he no sense of decorum? - Forget decorum! Has he no sense of righteousness? This woman is unclean! She can't touch him! ... Well, I guess we see his limitations: he doesn't even know a sinner when he sees one! If Jesus were a prophet he would know this woman is a sinner—after all, what is religion for if it is not to help us discern between the good and the bad, the righteous and the unrighteous, who's in and who's out? Jesus clearly is no prophet.

You see, the Pharisees had it all worked out. They knew who kept the rules and who didn't and how to tell the difference between them. Because that's important, isn't it? If our world is going to function smoothly, we need some rules. We need to know who's safe to be with, who will do things the way we do, who will look like us, pray like us, sing like us, serve like us. Sometimes, I suspect, the most comforting thing we get from our religion is the knowledge that we will be with people who are just like us. But guess who's coming to dinner?

In his letter to the Galatians, Paul is writing to those in the church who think they have it all figured out. To those who want everyone to play by the same rules, and behave themselves in the same ways, Paul says "I tried keeping the rules and worked my head off to please God and it didn't work (Gal 2:18)¹, for we know very well that we are not set right with God by rule-keeping, but only through a personal faith in Jesus Christ (Gal. 2:16)." Paul had apparently encountered the same Jesus that this woman did... Paul met the Jesus who offers forgiveness of all debts—wipes the slate clean with his abundant life, extravagant grace, and costly love. And what Paul discovered is that such an encounter demands a response without restraint. And so he pours himself out abundantly, lavishly, extravagantly ... to the point where he can say: "I have been crucified with Christ. My ego is no longer central. It is no longer important that I appear righteous before you or have your good opinion, and I am no longer driven to impress God. Christ lives in me. The life you see me living is not 'mine,' but is lived by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me (Gal. 2:19-20)."

¹ All quotations from The Message Paraphrase, Eugene Peterson.

After meeting Jesus on the Damascus road, Paul knew his sins forgiven, the slate wiped clean. And in response to the extravagant grace of God, Paul lived in extravagant discipleship, pouring himself out with abandon just as the woman at the dinner party poured out the costly oil from her alabaster jar. Just like her, Paul lived in love with God

With all eyes now on Jesus and the weeping woman and the overflowing ointment, and the loose hair and the erotic caresses, Jesus tells Simon a story... a parable about two debtors whose debts are both completely 100% forgiven. Canceled. Eliminated. Gone. "Which one will love more?" Oh... we know the answer....

Do you see this woman? Jesus asks. Can you look upon her? She has embraced her forgiveness and in her excessive, disturbing display, she is the passionate and true host to God's excessive, disturbing grace. And us? Well, we sit comfortably in our appropriate places, sedate and obedient. We're uneasy in the face of such ostentatious, sloppy excesses... But tell me, can we admit it, doesn't something fascinate us about her? Isn't it hard to drag our eyes away from this woman, who like Paul, has poured herself out, lost herself in grace. Exuberant, lavish, extravagant, and costly discipleship in response to the one who loves her in that same way. Do you think... is it possible....Can we learn to be in love like that?