

“Dinner Theater”

Luke 7:36-50

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This morning our attention is drawn to one of the most dramatic scenes in Jesus' ministry. It is similar to our modern day dinner theaters where people eat and then watch a play, only this was not planned and certainly not approved by the host.

Jesus was invited to the home of Simon the Pharisee for a meal. We are not told why Jesus was issued this invitation, but it appears the motive was not honorable.

Jesus was not shown the customary hospitality a guest would receive upon entering someone's home. He was not greeted with a friendly kiss, provided water to wash his feet or anointed with oil as a sign of cordiality.

As a matter of fact, we are informed in the previous section that the Pharisees were upset with Jesus because he was kind to the wrong people. This was especially true when he ate and drank with sinners like the tax collectors whom the Jewish leaders despised.

It appears Jesus was invited to Simon's home so he could be quizzed about his questionable behavior. From the beginning, this was never designed to be a quiet, pleasant, relaxing meal, but the reason for the tension caught everyone by surprise.

Sometime after the meal began, an uninvited woman appeared at Jesus' feet. She was carrying an alabaster vase that contained an expensive perfume. Alabaster vases were not cheap, so what was in them had to be worth a considerable amount of money and of great value to the owner.

Immediately, this woman began crying, and her tears fell on Jesus' feet. Without saying a word, she let her hair down to wipe away her tears. After doing this, she proceeded to anoint his feet with this precious perfume.

When Jesus did not stop this woman and rebuke her, the host, Simon the Pharisee, began murmuring. He had all the proof he needed that Jesus was not a prophet sent from God.

A true prophet would have known about this woman's soiled, sordid past and not let her touch him. An authentic and faithful prophet would have quickly reacted by scolding her and sending her away.

Jesus either heard Simon or knew what he was thinking and engaged him in a conversation. Jesus told a parable about a lender who forgave the debt of two of his debtors. One owed him the equivalent of fifty days' wages and the other five-hundred days' wages.

"Which of the two will love him more?" Jesus asked Simon. "I suppose the one who had the bigger debt," Simon reluctantly responded.

Jesus told him he was correct, and then Jesus turned to the woman while still talking to Simon. After asking Simon if he could see this woman, which he obviously could, Jesus proceeded to tell Simon all she had done for him as a guest in this home that Simon failed to do.

Why did this woman interrupt this meal and single Jesus out that evening? Evidently, this was not the first encounter she had with Jesus. They had previously met and Jesus must have treated her with the highest degree of respect and compassion. He listened to her story and forgave her many sins. Most of all, he restored her self-esteem and gave her hope for a better life.

No wonder she risked humiliation and public shame to barge in on that dinner. No one had ever been that kind to her, and her humble and grateful heart would have burst had she not let him know of her unspeakable love for him.

Knowing this woman must have been embarrassed and confused by Simon's reaction, Jesus publicly reminded her all her sins had been forgiven and she could go in peace. She probably left with even more love and appreciation for Jesus. She also knew the answer to the question the Pharisees blurted out as she moved past them.

"Who is this who even forgives sins?"

What part of this story intrigues you the most? For me, it is that dramatic scene where Jesus looks at this woman while speaking to Simon. He does not take his eyes off of her as he asks Simon, "Do you see this woman?"

Why did Jesus ask Simon this question? Of course Simon saw this woman, as did everyone else. She was the focus of everyone's attention. I am confident every eye in the room was fixed on her.

There was more to the question than just the obvious, wasn't there? When Jesus and Simon looked at this woman, they saw two entirely different things.

Simon saw a vile, wretched sinner who could never change. Nothing about her was redeemable or worthy of his attention.

Therefore, Simon's responsibility as a religious leader was to expose her unworthiness by shaming and shunning her each time he saw her, which he probably often did by telling her to get away from him. She was not just a nuisance to Simon, however, she was a threat.

Contact with her would defile him and keep him from going into the Temple or Synagogue to worship God. As far as Simon was concerned, his life would have been better if this woman had just disappeared.

Jesus, on the other hand, saw just the opposite when he looked at this woman and reacted quite differently. It was his belief that by God's grace she was redeemable, and with God's help she could become a new person.

Jesus' responsibility and moral duty was to listen to her story and to offer an alternative voice to her dilemma and a more hopeful vision for her future, which he did. He brought the better angels out of her, releasing them to help her to rise above her present circumstances.

How do you see people? Are you more like Simon or Jesus? I wonder what the people around you would say.

Why do you think Jesus took up for this woman? He had to be caught off guard just like everybody else that evening and had to make a quick decision. Why did he come to her aid and become her advocate?

Why didn't Jesus rebuke her like Simon did? It would have made his life much easier that night and in the months and years to follow.

For starters, Jesus knew Simon did not reflect the heart and nature of God or the prophets that preceded both of them. Simon's concept of God was unacceptable to Jesus and his interpretation of the prophets' messages completely missed the mark.

Jesus was already teaching by word and example that people of faith always look for ways to redeem and restore, not judge and condemn. Faith compels us to make hope visible under all circumstances and at all times so people can be set free to go in new directions.

This was why this woman, and anyone else in her situation, was invited to any circle Jesus was a part of, especially the one that night. As a matter of fact, as long as he was at that table, she belonged to be there as much as anyone else.

Is this how you feel? Does this reflect your heart and behavior? Are you this respectful, compassionate, inclusive and protective?

Who doesn't belong at your table? Who will never receive an invite into your circle of friends?

Let me caution you about something that may be shocking. Many religious people have a hard time seeing people. Far too often they make judgments about others based upon distorted views of God, personal preferences or threats to their holiness.

Instead of seeing individuals with wounds and scars and fears and frustrations and broken hearts and unfulfilled hopes and shattered dreams carrying around feelings of rejection,

loneliness, abandonment and despair, they see people who don't measure up to their expectations. When this happens, they tilt more toward Simon than Jesus.

When we create God in our image and deviate from what Jesus taught and did, we can be insensitive, cruel and exclusive. We can also become blind to our need for God's mercy and grace, as Simon did, by ignoring our own demons and struggles.

What do you think Luke wanted his readers to take away from this story? I think he wanted to caution them against becoming like Simon.

He wanted them to get rid of any pompous, self-righteous, arrogant attitudes that ignored their own struggles and need for mercy and grace.

He wanted them to see people as Jesus did, looking beyond their present circumstances to focus upon their wounds, scars, fears, frustrations, broken hearts, unfulfilled hopes and shattered dreams so they could hear their vocal and silent pleas for help.

He wanted them to help people who were trying to crawl out of hell instead of pushing them further down that bottomless pit with a critical, judgmental, condemning spirit.

He wanted them to understand their response to people would not only determine who that person could become, but also who they were becoming. He wanted them to guard against focusing upon the worst in others that would surely bring the worst out in them, as it did Simon.

Most of all, I think Luke wanted each reader to follow Jesus' example. He wanted them to be a friend to all people in the same way Jesus was.

He wanted them to listen to people's stories and respond with compassion. He wanted them to make hope visible with words of encouragement and a friendship that backed them up.

And I believe Luke wanted every reader to say what Jesus did to this woman that night through his actions. "As long as I am here, you are welcome in this place. You have nothing to fear."

Will you do this?