

June 13 - A sinner interrupts dinner at a Pharisee's house

In a small town you get to know your neighbors – the good and bad about them. When some one gets a bad reputation it's hard to change other folk's opinions. So when that woman interrupts dinner at Simon the Pharisee's house, he knows exactly what kind of person she is. She was known in the community as a sinner. Her sin is not revealed to us but most of us could come pretty close in guessing it.

She walks up behind Jesus and kneels. She is crying. As she weeps her tears fall onto his feet. She uses her hair as a towel to dry his feet and then she pours the expensive perfume on his feet.

Simon the Pharisee said: *If Jesus is really a prophet, he would know that this woman was a sinner and he would not let her touch him.* Luke 7:39

That Pharisee thinks he is the righteous one who is worthy to be in the company of Jesus, and that woman was the sinful one - unworthy to be with Jesus.

Jesus makes an interesting response:

Do you see this woman? Luke 7:44

The implication is that Simon, the self-righteous religious person doesn't really see this person. He only sees someone with a label, "sinner", not a person.

Jesus knew who she was, but he had moved beyond that to recognize that grace is needed in this woman's life. The others saw a sinner, but Jesus saw a woman who was reaching out for help.

Jesus is inviting them, and us, to look beyond the sin, and see the need. We have the opportunity of seeing with Jesus' eyes, seeing both the need and the possibilities for them - forgiving them when they fall short, encouraging them, offering help.

In AA and CA, the very first step is acceptance of the sinner. The group welcomes you unconditionally. Without the offer of acceptance and forgiveness, there is no hope for recovery and healing. But that does not imply approval of the behavior. Rather it's a first step toward changing the behavior.

Seeing beyond the sin – Some people are looking for a community of forgiven and forgiving sinners. Are we that kind of fellowship?

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The Pharisee said: "She is a sinner." – One who breaks God's law.

God's law in the Old Testament is specific and detailed. In addition to the 10 commandments, there are 600 other rules. For example, there were rules about what kind of food was forbidden, how animals were slaughtered. And even how and when you wash your hands. The idea was that by keeping them the Jews would be a separate, distinct people - holy and righteous, set apart and different from everyone else. Those laws and their observance had ensured their survival and distinctive identity as God's people through centuries of persecution and exile.

That was its good purpose and also the problem. Simon, the host at dinner, was a Pharisee – a student of the Bible and a teacher – who did his best to keep all of the rules. And so he avoided those who didn't keep the law, like that uninvited woman who showed up at dinner. She was a sinner – and her sins were in some sense public. A religious

teachers like himself and Jesus should have nothing to do with someone like her. She was a Jew, but also an outsider - someone to be avoided by the religious.

That's the problem - those rules created insiders and outsiders – both within the Jewish community, and also between Jews and non-Jews. So Paul could write: *We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners.* Galatians 2:15

The first churches were made up entirely of Jews. When non Jews – gentiles - joined, did they have to become Jews in order to be Christians? How could Jewish Christians sit at the same table with non Jews who didn't observe all the kosher food laws?

That's a problem Paul addresses in Galatians. He had founded their churches, but then left, continuing on a missionary journey. Some time later, he learned that other missionaries had visited the Galatian churches and told them that even though they were Christians, they still had to observe those Jewish laws. After all, they are in the Bible, and thus commanded by God. They claimed Paul had watered down the message to make it easier to win converts. Paul responded:

No one will ever be saved by obeying the law... We have believed in Christ, that we might be accepted by God because of our faith in Christ – and not because we have obeyed the law. Galatians 2:16

Paul's point is that we are not made right with God by keeping the rules – the law. Because no one can perfectly keep all of God's Law. Rather, we are brought into a right relationship with God by His grace and mercy. We respond to God's grace with faith - by trusting God and His promises. He doesn't accept us based on what we've done or who we are, but rather based on who He is and what Christ has done. Salvation is not based on some point system, with merits and demerits. Some aspect of the divine nature is more fundamental than the need to balance wrong-doing with retributive justice. God doesn't need to get even – He's bigger than that. No one perfectly obeys God's law and thus all are sinners before God. So in that sense, we're all equal in the eyes of God.

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So in today's gospel, Jesus encounters not one, but two sinners. First the woman whom Simon refers to as a sinner – and Jesus does not deny that she is a sinner. But the second sinner is Simon the Pharisee, who was so quick to judge her.

But when Jesus looks at her, he sees a “daughter of Abraham” – a member of the same family as Simon. She also has a claim on the goodness and mercy of God.

Jesus demonstrates God's grace – his acceptance of this woman – by saying to her *Your sins are forgiven.*

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That illustrates what Paul is writing about. God will accept someone, even though that person's conduct does not deserve a favorable verdict. Our hope for deliverance rests not on our worthiness, but solely on God's mercy and goodness.

We know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ. And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by faith in Christ, 16

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“Justified” - made right with God, forgiven and accepted by the Father as his son, his daughter. But to receive the benefit of that, you have to believe it, which is faith. As in the gospel, the woman believes Jesus can help, and accepts forgiveness from him. Jesus concludes by saying to her:

Your faith has saved you. Go in peace. 7:50

Her faith. Faith is believing in Jesus, being persuaded His teaching is true for your life. And acting on that faith by entrusting yourself to the Lord

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Paul offers an insight into the meaning of that word “faith”;

The life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. 2:20

“I live by faith *in* the Son of God” can also be translated “I live by the faith *of* the Son of God.” It’s a double sided expression, that switches the emphasis from just our faith to Christ’s faith.

In other words, we’re not just living by *our own* faith; we’re living by *Christ’s* faith – Christ’s own faithfulness moving in us and through us. And the hallmarks of that faithfulness are love and self-giving.

Our faith, empowered by the Holy Spirit, can bear the character of Christ’s – a steadfastness grounded in absolute reliance on God. We can imitate His trust.

In the gospel, Jesus shows the judgmental Pharisee and that woman to both be sinners - and both equal members of the family of God. Paul makes the same point in Galatians. Jews and non Jews are part of the same family. Our baptism incorporates us into the people of God, thus drawing us from individualism and isolation into a community of faith.

Faith in Christ involves participation in a community of people who are dependent on one another in line with our common dependence on the Lord. It draws us into a strange fellowship where previously significant divisions and distinctions no longer matter.

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All of this is illustrated by the baptism of Seth Eugene Wiesehan. That little baby has done nothing to earn or merit God’s grace and mercy. But his baptism is the outward sign that God’s grace comes to each one of us as a gift. Like Seth, we are all children of the heavenly Father - accepted, forgiven and loved by the Lord.