

Sermon Series: They'll Know We are Christians

Sermon Title: Out of Order

Luke 7:36-50

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Having learned that Jesus was a guest in the home of a Pharisee, a woman of the city, a prostitute, came with a bottle of very expensive perfume and stood at Jesus' feet, weeping, raining tears on his feet. Letting down her hair, she dried his feet, kissed them, and anointed them with the perfume. Now when, Simon, the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, "If this Jesus was the prophet I thought he was, he would have known what kind of woman this is who is falling all over him." (Luke 7:37-39)

In his book *What Good Is God?* Philip Yancey writes about being invited to speak at a conference on ministry with women in prostitution. After some discussion with his wife, Yancey agreed to accept the invitation, as long as he could have the opportunity to talk with the women and hear their stories. At the end of the conference Yancey said, "I had time for one more question. So I asked them, did you know that Jesus referred to your profession? Let me read you what he said: 'I tell you the truth, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you.' Now he was speaking, in this instance, to the religious authorities of his day. What do you think Jesus meant? Why did he single out prostitutes in this way?"

After several minutes of silence a young woman from Eastern Europe spoke up and said. "Everyone has someone to look down on. Not us. We are at the bottom. Our families, they feel shame for us. No mother nowhere looks at her little girl and says, 'Honey, when you grow up I want you be good prostitute.' Most places, we are breaking the law. We are not blind; we know how people feel about us. People call us names; look down on us, despise us. They see us as less than human, just objects. We feel it too. We are the bottom. And sometimes when you are at the bottom, you cry for help. So, when Jesus comes, we respond. Maybe Jesus meant that."¹ When you're at the bottom you cry for help and Jesus comes and you respond.

Jesus reorders life. Jesus, has in fact, reordered the entire cosmos. Everything we believed about the way the world should work; all of our well-planned structures, systems, and conventions – Jesus challenges all of that. The ways we separate people into good and bad, religious and irreligious, faithful and unfaithful, saint and sinner, worthy and unworthy - Jesus calls all of that into question and reorders our lives. He calls into question the very ways we have structured society and offers us a new vision of community not based upon merit, or birth, or race, or nationality, or gender, but upon grace, upon everyone getting what they don't deserve. You see Jesus didn't bring just another way of being religious, another way of thinking and talking about God. He inaugurated a Kingdom and a whole new way of being human.

¹ Philip Yancey, *What Good is God?* p. 75.

“Jesus wants us to realize that we are all like this woman. She has come to Jesus with a large, unpayable debt of sin,” an unbelievable weight on her shoulders. It is like a cloud hovering over her everywhere she goes, naming who she is, defining her proper place in the community. It is a yoke around her neck, a burden that is neither light nor easy. And by telling this story, Luke wants us to see ourselves. We are all like the woman and like the debtor who owes God an unpayable debt. And our healing comes when we, like this woman, this sinner in need of God’s grace, our healing our salvation comes when we kneel at Jesus’ feet and pour out our love.²

“Everyone present, including the woman, knows that she is a sinner. They all know what she does, who she is, the company she keeps. And they’re wondering what on earth she thinks she is doing when she comes into the room and kisses, and washes, and anoints Jesus. Doesn’t she know her place? That he is holy and she is not? Painfully aware of her sin, her brokenness, and alienation, not unlike the woman last week who reached out to touch the hem of Jesus’ garment, she is drawn to Jesus as one who offers forgiveness and hope. Her actions towards Jesus show her joy at what *he* makes possible. And Jesus evidently sees her as a child of God, and their encounter is an occasion for restoration in her life and a new relationship between them.”³

Now as James Moor suggests, all of this is hard on Simon, the Pharisee. He sees in this woman not a child of God but a threat to his goodness. She is someone to avoid...to ignore. Simon is not a bad man. He is actually very religious and is anxious to do what is right, to be right, but his goodness gets in the way. He is blind to the fact that he too is a sinner forgiven and healed only by the grace of God. He is blind to how he and this woman are connected at the deepest level. It would be customary to offer hospitality to one’s guest by greeting them with a kiss, offering them water to wash their feet, and anointing your guest as a person of honor. He does none of this. He doesn’t offer hospitality to Jesus nor does he extend hospitality to the woman. In his goodness he shuts himself off from her and thus shuts himself off from Jesus.⁴

We are not so different from this woman and others like her. We simply have the means and resources to hide, to cover up, to mask our sin and brokenness. We can make ourselves look better. And yet we are all poor, all broken, all sinners in need of grace. None of us can save ourselves because we are clever, or well-educated, or have positions of power or influence. We are all equal before God. As Paul says, “...all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”(Romans 3:23) And the sooner we come to terms with this and get really honest about it the better off we will be and the closer we will come to embodying the Kingdom of heaven on earth, the closer we’ll come to having our lives re-ordered by Jesus.

² James T. Moor, *Day 1*, June 17, 2007.

³ Moor.

⁴ Moor.

It's the woman who recognizes Jesus for who he is and offers him hospitality. This good, religious man is too concerned about keeping up appearances, about making sure no one is offended, that he misses an opportunity to truly welcome Jesus and the change Jesus brings when he sets up residence in your life. It's a prostitute, an outcast, a sinner, one of those non-church people who greet Jesus with a kiss, washes his feet, and who anoints him as an honored guest. In her humility, with her heart bowed low, she sees what the others miss. In pouring out her heart as an offering to Christ she is forgiven, healed, made whole, and blessed.

And then there's Simon, the Pharisee. We shouldn't be too hard on Simon because Simon's story is too often the church's story. And people like the woman in the story feel it. People who, like her, are drawn to Jesus, too often end up avoiding the church. Again, Phillip Yancey tells the story of a friend in Chicago who worked with some of the poorest of the poor in the inner city. He was visited once by a woman whose life was in a mess, falling apart. She had been selling her body in order to support her drug habit; and she was homeless, sick, and unable to buy food for herself or her children. Yancey's friend asked if she had thought about going to a church for help, and the woman seemed horrified. "Church...Why would I ever go there? I was already feeling terrible about myself. They'd just make me feel worse." She had experienced church not as a place of forgiveness and peace, but as a place of judgment and inhospitality. In an effort to be like Simon, to be good, the Church, we, sometimes put on our best face to welcome the "saints", and forget that we're called to be a hospital for sinners. We forget that throughout his ministry Jesus made space for those who were typically unwelcome. How many times in the gospels does it say, "He ate with outcasts and sinners?"

In his commentary on Luke, Fred Craddock wonders where one goes when told to go in peace as Jesus instructs this woman to do at the end of our story. Where's she going to go? Where are people like her going to go and find forgiveness and peace? Where will they be welcome, not for whom we want them to be, but for whom they are? Where can they meet the Jesus who dries their tears, and heals their wounds, and forgives their sins? "What she needs," Craddock says, "is a community of forgiven and forgiving sinners. This gospel story "screams the need for a church, one that says you are welcome here."⁵ You are welcome here. Now it's true, God longs for us to be so much more than we are. God has a beautiful dream for our lives, but for now, Jesus eats with outcasts and with sinners, so we are welcome, all of us prodigals, are welcome just as we are.

Christ commands us to practice that kind of radical hospitality. That's one of the ways the world will know we are Christian. I often wonder in my own life how I'm more like Simon, worried about being good, than I am like this woman who seemed to be only concerned with loving and welcoming Jesus. What would it take, what would need to be a bit out of order for me, for you,

⁵ Fred Craddock, Interpretation: Luke. p. 106.

for Boone Methodist, for King Street Church, and Blackburn's Chapel, and Laura's work in Bradford, what would it take for us to have lives that proclaim to people like this woman, to sinners, and outcasts, "You are welcome here"? What about our life as Church might need to be reordered by Jesus for us to be a place where saints and sinners find peace? Imagine that as our reputation in this community. If people said, "that Boone Methodist, it's an odd and crazy place. They've got all kinds of people over there. But you know, it seems to be a place of forgiveness and peace." This wilderness world needs some outposts of peace that practice radical hospitality where sinners are greeted with a kiss, their sins washed clean, and the anointing grace of God is poured out like costly perfume.

There is an old legend about Judas Iscariot that Madeleine L'Engle tells. The legend is that after his death Judas found himself at the bottom of a deep and slimy pit. For thousands of years he wept his repentance, and when the tears were finally spent, he looked up and saw way, way up a tiny glimmer of light. After he had contemplated it for another thousand years or so, he began to try to climb up towards the light. The walls of the pit were dark and slick, and he kept slipping back down into the darkness. Finally, after great effort, he neared the top only to slip and fall all the way to the bottom once again. It took him years to recover, all the time weeping bitter tears of grief and repentance, and then Judas started climbing again. After many more falls and efforts and failures, he reached the top and dragged himself into a room with twelve people who were seated around a table. "We've been waiting for you, Judas," Jesus said. "We couldn't begin until you came."⁶ Now we don't work our way back into the good graces of God. We don't earn our way out of the pit, when we're at the bottom. God's grace and love are freely offered and God is always searching, calling, welcoming, and inviting us to find our place at the table. That invitation, our salvation is God's work. But the feast is incomplete if there isn't room for saints *and* sinners.

So many people are looking for a community of forgiven and forgiving sinners, a place of welcome and peace. The world needs us and the gospel calls for us to risk being a little out of order. After all, one of our core values here at Boone UMC is to ask ourselves, "Have I walked with someone who is not like me?" Jesus was out of order all over the place. He spent most of his ministry around the wrong kinds of people. But it turns out, in the Kingdom of God those are the honored guests. Those are the very ones to whom Jesus expects his Church to say, "We've been waiting for you. We couldn't begin until you came." Because when we didn't deserve it and when we weren't all dressed up in our Sunday best, those were precisely the words he spoke to us. Thanks be to God. Amen.

⁶ Moor.