

“Strange Tablemates”

Galatians 2:15-21; Luke 7:36–8:3

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

September 6, 2015 – 15th Sunday after Pentecost – Rev. Ronald Botts

The Gospel lesson for today is often known by the heading, “The Sinful Woman Who Was Forgiven” or something of the like. If you’re not aware of it, these division titles common to most Bibles are not from the ancient text itself, but have been created by editors to summarize passages for the reader. Titles make searching for a particular story much easier because you can skim through the Bible until you find the right one. They’re convenient, but not sacred. Sometimes they fit well, but not always—at least to my interpretation of what’s important.

“The Sinful Woman Who Was Forgiven.” Well, that’s true. Our lesson for today tells that story and it’s a wonderful assurance that our sins can be lifted from us. Besides Jesus, the main characters in this story are the woman with the jar and Simon the Pharisee. The title could go with the situation of either of these people because Jesus addresses both of them. It might as easily be called “The Man Who Thought He Was Better Than Others” because that is the additional theme of the lesson.

Jesus is invited by Simon to his house, a different Simon than the disciple Peter. While there at the table a woman comes into the room, perhaps through an open courtyard or simply stepping in from the street. Houses in those days were much easier to enter than homes of today with their complex locks and security systems. The unnamed woman doesn’t just stumble in by happenstance, but it’s clear that her entry is intentional and planned. She knows full well where Jesus is and she has brought a jar filled with costly ointment.

Simon protests her being there, though he doesn’t seem to be particularly surprised that an unknown woman suddenly appears in his dining room. What he is concerned about is that her actions are inappropriate and unacceptable. Simon thinks to himself that, if Jesus is the kind of prophet that others claim, then he should know that the woman should be denounced and sent away. Jesus, instead, doesn’t withdraw his feet. He lets her clean them with her tears and, further, allows her to soothe them with scented oil.

Simon regards all this as wrong. Jesus could easily read this conclusion from his face. His thoughts were transparent: the woman shouldn’t be in the home of a Pharisee and she definitely shouldn’t be doing this. Simon is judgmental; Jesus is accepting. Simon would turn her away; Jesus would meet her where she is.

When I think of Jesus, many descriptors come to my mind. Certainly “welcoming” would be one of the first. He stands there in so many passages with open arms, ready to receive. Today I hope also that this would be a fitting way of describing both our congregation and the Presbyterian Church as a whole. We are an open and welcoming church of an open and welcoming denomination.

If you’re a person of good will and intention we’re glad to sit with you at the table. We don’t look for ways of excluding persons, but are intentionally inclusive. We’re not big on litmus

tests to determine who should or should not be here. We're not threatened by the differences represented in our members and friends, but instead delight in the diversity that we bring.

Some of you could be here because of these very reasons. You may have found intolerance elsewhere or even suffered discrimination because of who you are. You may have been hurt by a church that professed the love of Jesus Christ, then let you know that this didn't include you. You may have been accepted until you honestly questioned some of the tenets and practices of the church hierarchy. You may have discovered that uniformity was held higher than unity in spirit.

If we were to add some additional dialogue in keeping with our Gospel lesson today, it might go something like this: "Now when the Pharisee, who had invited him saw the woman, he said to his servants, 'Get her out of here! She doesn't belong here among good people.'

"But Jesus spoke up and said to him, "Wait a minute. She's Ok. Maybe a few flaws, but they can be corrected. Who of us doesn't have some rough edges? Who's without sin that he or she can claim superiority? Stay, sister, and continue what you have come here to do. No one in this house met me with the common courtesy of washing my dusty feet and here you're doing it with just your tears! I tell you her sins, which may have been many, have been forgiven. The faith she has shown in her actions has been her saving. Go now in peace.'

"Oh, and thanks for supper, friend. I hope you have learned something tonight which will change your life, too. When your heart is ready, come and see me. I'll be waiting for you."

This story of inclusion and welcome comes at a time today when many churches are drawing back into a shell and attempting to keep the wider world out. It often comes out sounding like a "we're right and your wrong" kind of religion. Either you agree with us or we're not talking.

While this split is all too common in the Christian church, we see it evidenced in many faith groups worldwide. The trend may not be new, but modern communication makes us more aware of this intolerance. Every day we hear of some new evidence of bigotry and destruction done in the name of God.

At Highlands I think we should always be ready to study, dialogue, and pray with any of the many expressions of Christianity. We may not see things exactly as some do, but we can feel a kinship with them because it is Christ himself who links us. We have learned that we can respect others even when we disagree and can love them despite our differences with some of their interpretations, stands, and practices.

A number of years back I was invited to be among a handful of Protestants to robe and be part of the installation of the new Catholic Bishop of Lafayette, Indiana. Fr. George Fulcher asked me to take part in this important day for him and I had no hesitation in accepting. My consideration was not influenced at all by what was different between our two traditions, but rather what linked us together as brothers in Christ.

As I walked in the grand processional that day, a trumpet chorus playing over the swell of the mighty cathedral organ, I felt good that the people of that diocese would be getting a faithful man who would serve them well. Those things we didn't hold in common paled with the

celebration of a worthy person who would bring solid leadership to this branch of our one common Church.

Here at Highlands we join readily with others on a regular basis. Whether it's through the Sawmill Interfaith Community Care, the Columbus Metropolitan Area Church Council, the Ohio Council of Churches, or just pairing up with one or more congregations for special partnership, we do it as a matter of course. It's so natural to us that we don't even think about it—we just do it because it feels right.

The question for us about joining hands is never about “why?” but it always comes down to “why not?” God can bring about miracles when we act as one, provided we really allow the Lord to lead us and don't let ourselves get in the way.

The text today goes on to say: “Soon afterwards he [Jesus] went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God.” This congregation, even with its flaws, has gotten a pretty good start on our work these last 37 years. Wherever the remainder of 2015 takes us, we can't get ahead of God or go it alone. We have to meet others in common recognition and service. This may provide us with some strange tablemates from time to time, but then that's the example we see in today's lesson.

Jesus knew full well that the woman who entered to humbly wash his feet was not without flaws, but he welcomed her in the sincerity with which she came. He knew her heart and welcomed her despite what some believed kept her out of proper company. Neither her gender or her past excluded her from a place in his presence. That should be a clue to us where and when we might extend an invitation on his behalf.

We see in Jesus just what the Savior was in our morning text. Most importantly, we see in Jesus just what the Savior is in today's world. Let this guide us in our faith.