

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
305 EAST MAIN STREET
DURHAM, NC 27701
PHONE: (919) 682-5511



“Guess Who Came to Dinner”

A sermon by Joseph S. Harvard

11th Sunday in Ordinary Time

June 13, 2010

1 Kings 21:1-21; Psalm 5:1-8; Galatians 2:15-21; Luke 7:36-8:3

Gracious God, we gather here this morning in your presence, desperately needing to hear a word of hope for our lives, for our individual struggles, for things we don't understand, for a world that at times seems to have gone mad with environmental disasters and wars and rumors of wars. Speak to us out of these ancient words that your Holy Spirit guide us so that we may hear and believe and trust and follow where you lead us. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Carlisle and I have a friend, who lives in another city, who loves to give parties. She is great at throwing a party—a dinner party, that is. She prepares excellent meals and her table is always well-appointed. One of the neat things about her parties is that she often invites a diverse group to join her for dinner. During the meal, she serves up more than just a delicious meal. Her comments try to get reaction, involvement, and interaction between her dinner guests. Sometimes the conversation gets intense and heated. At such times, she has been known to get everybody's attention by asking, “Are we having fun yet?”

Have you noticed how much of Jesus' ministry is spent around the table with people talking to each other, with exchanges back and forth? Jesus spent a lot of time at meals. Breaking bread is essential to the life and ministry of Jesus. He tells parables about banquets with guest lists and seating assignments. There's a lot about eating dinner together in the life and ministry of Jesus.

On one occasion, Jesus was a dinner guest in the home of a Pharisee. The Pharisee was a religious and community leader, someone held in great respect. His name was Simon. As the guests arrived, a servant poured cool water over the feet of each guest and dried them with a towel. That was a common gesture in that day, a gesture of courtesy and respect. For some reason Simon neglected to extend this courtesy to Jesus. Some scholars think it was intentional. They haven't been there long, and they were gathered in the courtyard. That's where the meal was being held. It was visible and accessible from the street. A woman came, carrying a jar of ointment. She was an uninvited guest. She simply walks in, sees Jesus, is overcome by emotion. She starts to weep. She kneels down at his feet weeping, unloosens her hair, dries his feet with her hair, opens the jar, and anoints his feet with the ointment. Right here in the middle of a proper dinner party, she does these things!

“Are we having fun yet?”

It is a very intimate thing she is doing. It is extravagant. Ointment was very expensive, not something anyone would use for an everyday occasion. Worst of all, the writer tells us this woman was “a sinner.” What she had done to earn that description, we do not know. The loosened hair, the weeping, the ointment, the kiss she gave Jesus' feet leaves some people to speculate, but I'm not going to go there. The point is she had no business being there in the dining room of a proper, respectable religious leader.

Simon expresses his displeasure. He said to himself, “If this Jesus were really the real thing, if he were authentic, as some were saying, he would know about this person and ask her to leave.” Jesus' responded by telling a story about a creditor who forgave a huge debt and a small debt. He asked Simon, “Who was more grateful?” Simon said, “Well, I guess it was the one had the greater debt cancelled.” Then he reminded Simon that the woman, “the sinner,” had extended him the hospitality that Simon had neglected. Then he made this point: “Her sins, which are many, are forgiven, and she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.”

Jesus' purpose is to get into Simon's heart. Jesus had already accepted the woman and received her extravagant love. Obviously she knew about him beforehand. He had shown her acceptance and grace that touched her deeply. Now, Jesus has his eye on Simon. Jesus has respect for Simon, respects his integrity, his leadership, his devotion to his religion and its law. Simon likes Jesus; he is intrigued with his authentic and strong teaching. They admire each other, but they have very different notions of what God wants and what God is about in the world. Simon concludes that God wants order. He sounds like a good Presbyterian, doesn't he? He wants things done decently and in order. God did not want a woman like this at a dinner party. God wants people like her to stay in her place outside, at least until she confesses her sins, mends her ways, and becomes presentable and acceptable and does things in a decent and orderly way.

Jesus, on the other hand, welcomes the woman's presence at the dinner table. He wants her to be part of the community, not an outsider. He does not believe that you have to be good to get in. Jesus is inclusive. He expresses his faith by inviting the woman, embracing the woman, forgiving the woman—"You are welcomed here!"—while Simon says, "Wait a minute. This is not the way it should be done."

"Are we having fun yet?"

How do we see ourselves in this story? Who do we identify with, Simon or the woman? Simon, offended by grace, and are we not sometimes? Before you get too hard on Simon, remember when you exercise prejudice against people who are prejudiced, that's just another form of prejudice. Jesus is also reaching out to Simon. But Simon, a Pharisee, a good man, was offended by Jesus' grace extended to a sinful woman. Sometimes, my friends, we are offended by grace extended to people like this woman.

It really is radical grace that Jesus came to offer us, my friends. We don't own it. It is not just for people who we consider right and respectable, for whom we have concern and empathy. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ is extended to everyone, to Simon, the woman, the insiders, the outsiders, the lost, the left behind.

In his book, *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace*, Miroslav Volf, a Croatian theologian who teaches at Yale, explores the radical grace that is at the heart of Christianity. We have trouble with the whole notion of grace, he says, because in our heart of hearts, we don't believe it. Everything has to be earned ultimately, paid for. God, we seem to believe, is a negotiator. We receive God's grace as a reward for being good. We become good Christians because of what we know and how we apply ourselves. Volf says American consumer culture simply doesn't "get" grace at all. "There is no such thing as a free lunch.... Everything is for sale.... Everything must be paid for, ultimately." But grace is a gift. It's God's gift. It's radical. It's amazing. This story makes it perfectly clear. Every gift warrants a gift in response.¹

God has arranged it in a different way, and that's the point of this story, so that being forgiven and forgiving go together: receiving and giving are part of the same experience, being loved and loving creates synergy, energy, passion, and extravagance. So being a Christian means receiving the gift of love and grace and forgiveness and responding appropriately.

Frederick Buechner, a poet, author, and theologian said, "Grace is something you can never get but only be given. There is no way to earn it or deserve it or bring it about any more than you can deserve the taste of raspberries and cream or earn good looks or bring about your own birth.... The grace of God means something like: Here is your life. You might never have been, but you *are* because the party wouldn't have been complete without you. Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don't be afraid. I am with you. Nothing can ever separate us. It's for you I created the universe. I love you."²

When our children were young, I remember one day, we'd all come in, frantically moving around, trying to get something done. We sat down at the table and immediately began to eat. One of my children turned to me and said, "Dad, have you said grace yet?"

¹ Miroslav Volf, *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace*, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005, p. 40.

² Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking; a theological ABC*, New York: Harper & Row, 1973, p. 96.

It is essential every day to say grace. Edith, who will be baptized shortly, is a gift of grace.

Saying grace is receiving those gifts and seeking to share them with others. Not because we owe it, but because we're so filled with gratitude. It is to entrust ourselves to God's love and care.

So friends, hear the Good News of this story. You are recipients of God's astounding, uncommon, radical grace. Edith is a recipient of God's astounding, radical grace. Be grateful. Be extravagant. And trust God.

“Are we having fun yet?”