The Eleventh Sunday in Ordinary Time

Prayer: God of love and grace, pour out your grace upon us as we hear your word proclaimed. Open our hearts to hear that which you would have us hear. Enable us to respond to the grace we have received, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Invite Jesus to dinner and you’ve got trouble. Like the relative from out of town who can’t wait to bring up taboo subjects like politics and religion, subjects that have a way of bring even the best gathering to a screeching halt, Jesus takes no prisoners.

In today’s text, Jesus has been invited to dine at the home of a Pharisee. Simon is his name and apparently not all Pharisees disliked Jesus. Some have seen and listened to him enough that their curiosity gets the better of them and they invite him over for dinner. Jesus has accepted the invitation and then, like in other social settings, it doesn’t go so well. So we’re used to unusual things happening when Jesus shows up, but this encounter is one of the more unusual. And I happen to think that she is one of the more intriguing characters in scripture—this unnamed woman, whoever she was.

The is no question that the role of women in early Christianity and down throughout history has been diminished. In the remarkable book by Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza entitled In Memory of Her, a book that attempts to uncover the earliest feminist theological origins of Christian communities, she argues that the story of this woman anointing Jesus’ feet, of which similar accounts are told elsewhere in the New Testament, marks a sharp contrast to other stories told regarding men.

Think about it, the names of men, including those who denied and betrayed Jesus, are all remembered, but the name of this woman, whoever she was, is not. The one who came to the party and recognized Jesus for who he was and openly and lavishly displayed her affection for him, isn’t even named in scripture. And worse, she’s actually criticized by some in attendance who recast the story in Gospel form at a much later date.

This observation has prompted some feminist theologians to suggest that because this same story is mentioned in Mark’s Gospel, the earliest gospel written, and because she was the only one who seems to have fully understood who Jesus was and what he was all about, much more so than the disciples, perhaps the first gospel written was really authored by her.

Now there’s a provocative thought. It’s also interesting to ponder and question why it is that the Christian church chooses to celebrate a meal like the one we’ll share today—a meal that includes deceit, betrayal and the general overtone of death, rather than a meal like the one in today’s text, where a woman comes into Jesus’ presence and lovingly and
lavishly displays her affection and devotion to him. The contrast between the two suppers is stark.

And such a contrast is further represented in the two principle characters in today’s text, the host and this uninvited guest.

Somehow, her bad reputation has preceded her to the party. Yet despite her reputation there is a kind of strength in her presence—a kind of determination to it. And the way her affection toward Jesus is described, makes it sound almost erotic. Can’t you imagine the scene, as she reaches toward her head and pulls out the combs holding her long hair in place, allowing it to gently fall to her shoulders, first in clumps and then as it unfolds and cascades down her back with a slight toss of her head. And then she begins to weep in his presence and bending down, allows her tears to flood over his feet. Then she quietly bows down even further until her hair covers Jesus’ feet and then as her head slowly sways back and forth, she wipes his feet with her hair, completely lost in the moment. It’s an altogether beautiful and loving image.

But Simon can’t stand it any longer. He’s uncomfortable like a lot of people get uncomfortable when they’re in the presence of someone expressing intimacy and tenderness and an apparent loss of control.

So Simon says to himself, but loud enough for everyone to hear, “If this man were a prophet, a real prophet, he’d know what kind of woman this is slobbering all over him like this.” After all, prophets are in the business of identifying, naming and denouncing sin. Why doesn’t he seem to know or care about how much of a sinner she is? Why isn’t he preoccupied with her sin the way the rest of us seem to be preoccupied with it?

Then the lesson.

Jesus tells Simon a little parable. There are two debtors needing to be forgiven. One owes a large amount the other a lesser amount. Both are forgiven. Now, think about it….which one would be more grateful? Simon answers, “I suppose the one who has been forgiven more.” And then Jesus turns on his host by comparing Simon’s rather puny hospitality with that of the uninvited woman with a reputation. Jesus turns on Simon who has been so good at being religious, that he doesn’t even recognize the extent to which he himself has been a recipient of much grace.

And the irony here is that in order for you to be able to extend grace, you must first realize how much grace has been extended to you. Because being aware of just how much grace you’ve received cannot help but to make you more gracious toward others. And haven’t we all see the tragic, unhealthy connection between the religiously proud, the most pious uptight church folk who at the same time tend to be some of the most intolerant, un-accepting and ungracious people around? We’ve all seen that.

I think the reason Jesus enjoyed hanging around with sinners is no mystery. Billy Joel sang about it, “I’d rather laugh with the sinners than cry with the saints—the sinners are
much more fun.” Or another way of saying it, people who recognize and acknowledge their own need are simply more honest, more real and therefore inviting. And far too many religious folks are busy standing in judgment of others to the point of not being able to see the grace in their midst or to acknowledge how much of it they too have received.

Last week Friday morning, I met Joann Lee for breakfast at the St. Paul Hotel. After an hour and a half of sharing a meal together and discussing the church and our exciting plans for the future, she went up to her room to drop something off while I settled up with our waitress. When the waitress returned to the table with the bill, she said, “I couldn’t help but overhearing some of your conversation and I just have to tell you how much I love the House of Hope.” I told her that I was the minister there and she surprised me by saying, “I know.” Panic set in because she didn’t look familiar to me at all.

“The church is so beautiful and it does so many wonderful things,” she continued as I searched her pleasant face for some sign of familiarity. I told her that the person I just had breakfast with was going to become one of the ministers at the church and that she’d be preaching on Sunday and that the congregation would be voting to call her. The waitress seemed genuinely pleased with this new development. I told her it was going to be a great Sunday and that she should plan to be there. She said, “Maybe I will be.” Maybe you will be? Come on, this is going to be a great Sunday, what do you mean maybe, I thought to myself. Then, out of the blue as I was preparing to leave she said to me, “I attend House of Hope on Monday nights. It’s meant the world to me.”

Frederick Buechner, in his book *Telling Secrets*, describes a scene of grace and honesty that he has experienced and one that gets repeated in church halls and VFW halls all over the country and the world, for that matter, at virtually every hour of the day. He writes,

In one sense they are strangers who know each other only by their first names and almost nothing else about each other. In another sense they are best friends who little by little come to know each other from the inside out instead of the other way around. They do not know each other’s biographies, but they do know something of each other’s frailties, failures and fears. They do not give each other advice. They simply give each other stories about the good and the bad of what has happened to them over the years. Some are educated, and some never finished grade school. Some are on welfare and some have hit the jackpot. Some are straight and some are gay. There are senior citizens among them and also twenty-year-olds. As they live their lives they try to follow a kind of spiritual rule, which consists basically not only of uncovering their own deep secrets but of making peace with the people they have hurt and been hurt by. They sometimes make serious slips. They sometimes make miraculous gains. They laugh a lot. Once in a while they cry. When the meeting is over, some of them embrace. Sometimes one of them will take special responsibility for another, agreeing to be available at any hour of the day or night if the need should arise.”

And then Buechner says,
I do not believe that such groups…are perfect any more than anything human is perfect, but I believe that the church has an enormous amount to learn from them. I also believe that what goes on in them is far closer to what Christ meant his church to be, and what it originally was, than much of what goes on in churches I know. These groups, at their best, are like families because in them something which is often extraordinarily like truth is spoken in something that is extraordinarily like love (pp.89-94).

The text this morning is a tale of two sinners. Obviously, both have encountered Jesus sometime prior to this dinner. Simon encountered him enough to know that he was intrigued and wanted to know him better. This nameless woman with a reputation, however, was drawn to him perhaps because just like her, Jesus also had a reputation. But I also suspect that she was drawn to him because in spite of her reputation, she knew Jesus wouldn’t let that stand in the way of anything. He wasn’t going to busy himself by revisiting all of her previous transgressions or opening her old wounds. Rather, what she trusted she’d find in him was exactly what she found in him, namely, one who didn’t just welcome people like her but one who welcomed people especially like her. And so she responds to the grace she’s received—the grace that welcomed her unconditionally, the grace that accepted her and saved her.

I know that many people think Christianity is about rules and requirements. But responding to the grace we’ve received is the only requirement I can think of that really matters.

Amen.