

As we continue to journey with Jesus to the cross this Lent, we also continue our sermon series of “Meeting Jesus at the Table.” We keep witnessing over and over again that who Jesus is eating with as well as what Jesus does demonstrates that Jesus is choosing the path of downward mobility. “In Luke’s Gospel, it is precisely because Jesus was ‘suffering with’ the outcasts- showing them compassion- that those in power challenged his authority” (Michal Beth Dinkler, [workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org)). This is the same with today’s passage as well. Today’s Gospel story about Jesus meeting us at the table has a somewhat similar version in all four of the gospels, which is rare. The stories involve a woman anointing Jesus, but the details vary. All versions concur that the incident took place in Bethany but from there the stories differ considerably. Luke’s version, which is set near the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, is about ‘a women in the city, who was a sinner’ (v. 37?). **PRAY. READ.**

In a Jewish context, the descriptor ‘sinner’ would indicate someone who was not faithful to God’s law. Luke does not specify the sin; however the image that remains most common in Christianity is that of a sensual woman- usually pinned as a prostitute, weeping at Jesus’ feet, wiping up her tears with long and tangled hair. “She is [portrayed as] needy and subordinate, a receiver of mercy at the feet of her Lord.” (Joyce Hollyday, *Clothed With The Sun*). What is it about how we choose to read scripture that paints women, in particular, in such a bad light? Let me explain. This unnamed woman has a lot piled on her that isn’t in scripture. We make a lot of assumptions about her. We assume she is a sex worker only because Luke tells us she is a sinner from the city. That may have been the case but what if her sins involved other things?! “This descriptor ties her to the

accusation leveled at Jesus in the immediate context: 'Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners' (7:34). It seems that this woman knows of Jesus' reputation and has likely even experienced his ministry. Her gratitude exhibited by the actions of weeping and kissing Jesus' feet point in this direction' (Brown). But I'm getting ahead of the story. I find it fascinating that across the centuries, it is easier to give this unnamed woman that label because we're uncomfortable with what goes on in today's story. Did you know that Luke, more than any other Gospel writer, highlights portrayals of women? "Even while the twelve are the most prominent disciples in Luke's narrative, he accents the role of women in Jesus' ministry in important ways." Just keep reading into chapter 8 of Luke's Gospel and even further.

The setting of today's Gospel story is a dinner hosted by Simon, the Pharisee. Simon had invited Jesus to come and join him and some of his friends- probably other Pharisees- for dinner. I want to remind us all that "the Pharisees were actually the good guys in First Century Judaism. They were the ones who cared deeply about their religion and took responsibility for it flourishing" (David Lose, [workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org)). They followed the law to a T and tried to hold others accountable as well. Can't you just see Jesus, who ate with all kinds of folks, gathered around the table for a meal at Simon's house? I imagine the crowds may have been trying to see him from the windows, as Jesus had developed quite the reputation. His teaching and healing was known throughout the land. But we aren't told about the crowd. We're told about the dinner party. I imagine the dinner would be like a group of powerful intellectuals meeting at the Poinsett Club or maybe like a group of men gathered in the local barbershop? Can you

imagine when without warning an unnamed woman- maybe with a reputation, maybe not- breezes into the room? Do you think the conversation immediately changes? Talk about last week's awkwardness? What do you think would be the reaction? Well, first silence at the disbelief and shock and dis-ease. What else?

What happens next in today's biblical story really hits a nerve- not with Jesus but with Simon and his other guests! This bold unnamed woman enters into Simon's home uninvited with an alabaster jar of ointment and without speaking goes and stands behind Jesus and immediately begins to weep using her tears as water for Jesus' dusty feet. Then she follows that huge display with kisses for his feet as she anoints them. Now we may try to throw every excuse at this story to try and tell ourselves that this wasn't a big deal. It WAS a big deal! Women were not allowed at these dinner parties nor were they allowed to let down their hair in public- a big no-no, let alone carry on such a scene. Putting hair down, let alone kissing any body part was considered risqué, sensual, and scandalous behavior- too intimate for public view. Talk about a HUGE interruption? Though this woman didn't speak words; her actions spoke volumes. It was Simon's duty not only as a Pharisee but also as the host to address the inappropriate behavior taking place in his home. **But notice** he doesn't address it out loud. No, we're told he says **to himself**, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him—that she is a sinner" (v. 39). It is only in Luke's Gospel that he highlights Simon's unspoken thoughts, and Jesus' ability to perceive them. This fulfills the prophecy given by Simeon when Jesus was an infant. Simeon said, "The thoughts of many hearts will be revealed" (2:35). Jesus interrupts Simon's thoughts and calls him out, saying the equivalent of "Listen up, Simon!" Simon

acknowledges Jesus, and Jesus begins to tell him a parable about a creditor and two debtors. Jesus lays it out there plainly. "It's a setup, of course, as Jesus then compares Simon's lack of basic social manners with the woman's extravagant hospitality. Whereas the woman knows both her sin and her forgiveness and consequently lives out her gratitude, Simon, Jesus implies, does not act particularly grateful because he doesn't believe he needs forgiveness" (Lose).

A friend and colleague of mine tells a story of officiating a funeral for a member of a prominent family in town. Upon meeting with the family, my friend talked with the family about what music and scripture they wanted and went over the order of worship. Before she could finish, the daughter of the deceased snapped, "You will NOT call our mother a 'sinner.' I refuse to have her remembered that way!" In the liturgy often used at the end of a funeral or memorial service, we say "Acknowledge, we humbly pray, a sheep of your own fold, a sinner of your own redeeming." Why is it that we can't all admit while we're living or dead that we're sinners in desperate need of God's grace? Or why is it that we constantly beat up on ourselves about our sinfulness and tell ourselves that we aren't worthy of God's grace? Maybe "because admitting our need, guilt, and brokenness demolishes all our illusions about self-sufficiency? Or maybe because it's easier to beat up on ourselves than it is to receive God's grace. Since Eden on, humanity has been plagued by a keen ache and piercing hunger to make it on our own, to need no one, not even God (and maybe especially not God). Most of the time we're able, if not actually to be independent or to at least act that way, keeping the illusion fresh. That is, until Jesus comes along and offers us forgiveness. From the anger and shame and embarrassment we feel at his mere mention of the

word, we know he has us. We know he knows us. We know the jig is up, just like that. Our pretense fails, our dreams die, and we die with it” (Lose).

And then there’s that question that Jesus asks Simon after the parable question. **“Do you see this woman?”** I love this question because it can be meant in so many different ways. Do you see her hospitality, Simon? Do you see her as a child of God? Do you see her faith- her love and devotion for me? Do you see her as a woman with dignity? Do you see God’s gift of grace through her? Perhaps Jesus was also pointing the finger at the self-righteous, holier than thou, narrow views held by Simon that missed the moment of God’s grace. Simon, and I imagine perhaps the other men at the table flat out missed the point. I also imagine that “they took offense at the gesture unable to see love at work, unwilling to grasp the deeper meaning of radical hospitality” (Hollyday). Rules can be important and often provide structure which can be a good thing but rules can also get in the way of the Gospel and thus in the way of providing radical hospitality. Many years ago I read an interesting article entitled, “By the Book” out of The Christian Century by A. J. Jacobs, an editor at large for Esquire, who grew up in a secular Jewish household and as an adult has called himself agnostic. On July 7, 2005 Jacobs went on a year-long journey to live the Bible literally. As a matter of fact, he wrote a book about it. This book inspired Rachel Held Evans to write a counter book called: *A Year Of Biblical Womanhood*. Jacobs in preparing for his year packed away any of his clothes that were made of mixed fibers (Lev. 19:19)- because no two materials can be blended together- like Cotton and Polyester. What Jacobs discovered with the help of his wife, Julie, 2 year old son, Jasper, friends and strangers is that this year-long journey, affectionately known as

“Project Bible” took him to places- physically, emotionally and spiritually- that he thought he’d never go. Some parts of his story are hilarious- such as his wife sitting on anything sittable in their home during her monthly period so Jacobs would have no where to sit because she was unclean. And there were some parts that were really sad in his book. One such thing that struck me was his reflection on Ecclesiastes as he sat on a train in the subway of NYC. “I’m concentrating hard. Too hard. I feel a tap on my shoulder. I’m annoyed. I don’t like strangers touching me. I look up. It is a 50ish man. ‘Excuse me, this lady is feeling sick. Could you give her your seat?’ He points to a tall brunette woman who was standing right in front of me. How did I miss this? The woman looks horrible: Her face is sallow, nearly the color of lima beans. She is doubled over. And she is weeping. I get up in a hurry with mumbled apologies. To paraphrase Ecclesiastes, there’s a time for reading and a time for getting off your butt. I realize that I was what is known in Hebrew as a Chasid Shote. A religious idiot. In the Talmud, there’s a story about a devout man who won’t save a drowning woman because he’s afraid of breaking the no-touching-women ban. He’s the ultimate pious fool. The moral: Don’t be so caught up in the regulations that you forget about the big things, like compassion and respect for life.” A.J. Jacobs experienced many teachable moments and was surprised by grace each time.

“Christ, it seems, used interruptions as teachable moments. A time for parables. A time for vision. A time for pausing and considering what can be learned here? This woman came and, seeing Christ, burst into tears. Tears of guilt? Maybe. But also tears of joy and of healing and of transformation. Tears shed when one’s life was interrupted by grace” (Cynthia Campbell, *Meeting Jesus At The Table*). Sometimes we become so focused in what we’re doing or so legalistic in our understanding of

what it means to be a Christian...that we miss being surprised by God's amazing grace. "Maybe we need to ask ourselves how we respond to such interruptions? To such grace? As we continue our journey through the season of Lent, may we be open to the interruptions that might meet us along the way. May we take them as opportunities for growth and learning. May we shake off the Simon inside us, who would rather mumble disapprovingly. And instead, may we take those interruptions for what they are: opportunities. Opportunities for growth, love and grace. Grace is so overwhelming it needs no words. Grace so amazing it brings us to tears" (Campbell). Thanks be to God!