

Celebrating as an Act of Faith

Luke 7: 36-50

What makes for a really great party? One of the measures of a great party for me is having great food and plenty of it. For many it's having great stuff to drink and plenty of it. I also really enjoy a party where there are lots of interesting people and enjoyable conversations. A great party might be one that has a cake and perhaps some fun entertainment. Most important for me is that the host or hostess as well as the guests help you feel welcome, that they care you're there.

The same applies to our gathering for worship here at church. Each of us who is here on a regular basis, who consider this church our home, we are like hosts at a party. Each person visiting is like a guest at our gathering. Let me ask you a question, those of you are members regular attendees here, as you came in today to sanctuary, with whom did you talk? During the greeting time, to who did you talk? Speaking now to some of you who are courageous visitors – our guests, did you speak with anyone when you came in? How about during the greeting time?

There is nothing more important for this faith community than working to see that everyone who comes here--especially those of you who are visiting for the first or second time, or maybe have been visiting a while (possibly years), but who don't feel like a member of family—that you feel welcome. I hope each of you feels welcome here today. You are a welcome guest, a welcome friend, a cherished sister or brother at this gathering and in this place.

The Bible story today, from Luke's gospel, is about a party—a party to remember. The woman who crashed the party became the reason this particular gathering is remembered. It appeared to be a normal dinner party given by a high ranking religious leader, the Pharisee Simon. All the other leading Pharisees were in attendance. Jesus, the new guy who was unorthodox but intriguing, settles into place at table. He must have anticipated being grilled and even challenged by at some of the guests. But Jesus also seemed to be able to handle himself well in such situations.

Then, one of those awkward moments happened that party hosts just dread. Luke's Gospel describes, "a woman in the city, who was a sinner." (a prostitute) She walked right into the party. She crashed it and proceeded to make a bit of a nuisance of herself. Remember that guests in those days reclined at the table. They lay on couches, propped on an elbow, with their head near table and their feet away from it. Luke wrote, "She stood behind [Jesus] at his feet, weeping, and bathing his feet with her tears and drying them with her hair, [then] kissing his feet and anointing them with [an expensive] ointment."

Almost immediately, there was judging going on. Host and guests alike could have chosen any number of issues with which to find fault. They settled on criticizing the woman's reputation in the community and Jesus either for not realizing who the woman was or for allowing himself be associated with such a sinner. She was touching him and he did not stop her!

Jesus heard the muttering and the criticism. He responded, but not defensively nor with contrition. He did not get angry. He told a story, one with a sharp point!

A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he canceled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?

What would you answer? Simon, the host, answered, "I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt." And Jesus said to him, "You have judged rightly."

Why did Jesus tell that story? It seems to address the issue of appreciation – of people being appreciative for their lives, for God's gifts to them. Jesus dressed down his host by comparing how welcoming the prostitute was and how inhospitable was his dinner host.

Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment.

Who made the better choice and why? Clearly the woman did. She saw what was important in her life. It was not the powerful men who controlled access to and acceptance by society. It was not wealthy men who could make her life secure. It was not men who could validate her existence. But it was Jesus, the poor teacher. It was Jesus, the inappropriate guest and conscience of a people. It was Jesus, the human face of God who was both stranger and guest.

She made the space sacred by celebrating the presence of Jesus. We are called to make the space in which we gather sacred by celebrating the presence of Jesus in each guest, each stranger, and each friend. That presence may be even more in the strangers and the ones less familiar than in the familiar and the comfortable.

Over and over again in the Bible, the capacity to celebrate is an expression of God's life. It is perhaps the best way we have of experiencing heaven now. To celebrate well is to welcome the stranger and become friends with someone you don't know. It is to embrace the abundance that is present in and around us even when it's more familiar to focus on what we don't have.

Being people of faith does require a mindset of realism, being able and willing to face hard choices and deal with difficult realities. It also requires a willingness to walk by faith and to act according to what we envision instead of always acting according to what we see.

There is a tendency to think of faith as what we believe. And so it is, but faith is much more. It is also how we choose to look at life, at the world. Faith is a perspective we choose to take even if we choose a perspective quite different than what we've been used to taking. A new day starts today! Like the woman who celebrated Jesus, now is the time to choose a better way to live.

I have four concrete calls to action coming out of this story and this sermon. First, Introduce yourself to someone you don't know well before you leave church today. Second, make an appointment to have a one-on-one conversation with someone you'd like to know better, Third, and this is the tricky one, commit to take these first two actions each week for the next five weeks! Finally, count your blessings – and make a habit of counting them. Do this, and your life will be a life of praise.