

6-13-10      “A Place of Welcome”    Luke 7:36 - 8:3      Kathy Hartgraves

Have you ever had the experience of being at a fancy social gathering when someone (perhaps you, perhaps me!) says something really inappropriate or uncomfortable and everyone becomes quiet? I can see you know what I am talking about... This week's Gospel reading finds Jesus in such a situation. Jesus is the guest teacher at a gathering of who we assume are religiously and economically powerful men – men who carried the coveted social status of “creditor” rather than “debtor.”

These men have come to listen to Jesus, expecting to hear some pithy, perhaps amusing, teachings. They have NOT come to listen to the sobs of a deeply indebted/ sinful woman who happens to be kissing and anointing Jesus' feet. In the midst of this scene, Jesus tells a really odd story about forgiveness of debt then he asks the men gathered “Do you see this woman?” What a question! How could they NOT see her?

Her wild, ritually unclean behavior is an utter embarrassment to everyone at this elite gathering. It is especially embarrassing to Simon, the host, who likely has hoped that Jesus would make a great impression upon his guests.

In actuality, the guests really do not see this woman. They don't see that first and foremost, she is a beloved child of God. They don't see her extravagant acts as expressions of hospitality, love and gratitude. They don't see that her “sin” which is described as a life of prostitution – is undoubtedly linked with the systems of indebtedness from which they directly profit. They don't see the connections between their own wealth and her poverty. They don't see the connections between forgiveness of actual debt and forgiveness of “sins.”

It begs of us to ask the question - Do we see this woman? Are our gatherings so tightly shuttered that she can't even make it inside the door? And, if she does make into our lives and communities, would we recognize her as a fellow child of God and a channel for God's lavish grace? Would we be able to see how her well-being is connected with our own? Would we be a place of welcome for the bruised and battered soul of this woman?

“A Place of Welcome” – that is NOT what we see in Simon's house. Simon has invited Jesus to dinner, and while in Simon's house this unnamed

woman comes to visit Jesus. Everyone present, including the woman herself knows that she is someone in need of forgiveness. In her self-awareness she is drawn to Jesus as one who offers forgiveness and hope. Jesus sees her as a beloved child of God, making their encounter an occasion for restoration in her life and a new relationship between them.

All of this is hard on Simon. He sees in the woman not a child of God but a threat to his goodness. She is someone to avoid. Simon is not a bad man. Rather he is anxious to do right, to be right, but his goodness gets in the way. He is blind to the fact that he too has shortcomings and is in need of forgiveness and healing. He is blind to how he and this woman are connected at the deepest level. He does not offer hospitality to Jesus nor does he extend hospitality to the woman. In his goodness he shuts himself off from her.

Simon's story is too often the church's story. Simon's story is too often our story. And persons like the woman in the story feel it. People who, like her, were drawn to Jesus too often avoid the church today.

One of the most formative experiences I have had in ministry was the year I spent serving Seattle First United Methodist Church located at the time in the heart of downtown Seattle for I truly experienced the church as a place of welcome. The congregation devoted much of their ministry to serving the homeless and helping people in need. I have so many stories I could share about that time. One seems most applicable to our gospel story.

On two Sunday's a month the church offered what they called a "shared breakfast" a warm meal offered to anyone in need. As I arrived on those Sunday mornings it was common to see people lined up at the church door extending all the way around the block.

I will never forget a conversation that happened between one of our beloved congregation members and a woman prostitute who was in dire straits. This woman was homeless, sick, and unable to buy food for herself or her 2 year old daughter. She explained how she was teaching her daughter the trade – preparing her for a life like her mom.

The church member serving breakfast to this woman and her sweet daughter asked if she had thought about attending worship and allowing the church do more than feed them warm food - that perhaps she could draw strength from the faith community to live a different life. The woman

seemed horrified. "Attend worship?! Why would I do that? It is one thing to come into your basement to receive warm food but worship, I don't think so. I was already feeling terrible about myself. The people there would just make me feel worse." She had experienced church as a place of judgment and inhospitality and it felt a bit risky for her to come to the church if even for a warm meal.

In his commentary on our text Fred Craddock wonders where one goes when told to go in peace as Jesus instructs this woman to do at the end of our story. "What she needs," Craddock says, "is a community of forgiveness. The story," he says, "screams the need for a church, one that says you are welcome here." She had such a welcome from Jesus. She would have it on the streets of the city as well. The question is whether she would be welcomed in to the church, our church and the many churches surrounding us.

Too often church is experienced as a place of judgment and inhospitality. So many people are looking for a community of forgiveness. I believe they would find that community here at Spirit of Peace.

This woman from our gospel story who washed Jesus' feet is a brave person. What could have drawn her to risk everything in order to see Jesus? It may be that she saw Jesus showing love to the "unlovely" people around him. It may be that this love opened her up, for the first time, to the possibility of forgiving herself. That made her risk everything. And so Jesus says of her, "Her many sins have been forgiven--for she loved much." But that was not the end of it. Jesus told the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

Each Sunday we say something like that to one another. In our passing of the peace we say something like "Peace be with you, and also with you." We wish peace to one another every time we gather as a community. And we express our hope for one another saying "Go in peace." Indeed my friends we can go in peace this day knowing that we - like the unnamed woman in our gospel story - we, are a forgiven people.

May you and I be a forgiving presence to people in need of forgiveness in their lives. And may we be a place of deep welcome that draws people in - to experience the love and grace of God.

Let us pray – Gracious God, shape us by your presence among us, that we may be a church that extends your hospitality and forgiveness toward people so in need of you this day. May our lives together reflect and draw people into the experience of your great love for all people. Make us a place of welcome this day. In Jesus name we pray. Amen.