

WELCOME?

Psalm 32
Luke 7:36-8:3

Faith Community
June 17, 2001

Introduction

How would we react if a woman who was obviously a prostitute showed up for worship this morning? She looked like, dressed like and was a prostitute. What would our response be?

Or what if O.J. Simpson arrived here on a Sunday morning? It wouldn't be possible, but what if Timothy McVeigh had come here to worship? Would we ask them to leave? Would we shun them? Would we whisper about them all through the service? Would we leave the service and go home? Or maybe sit in our seats giving them ugly, disapproving looks?

How do you think you would respond?

I

In the scripture we read this morning, Jesus goes to the home of a Pharisee for dinner. Picture this scene in your mind because in Jesus' day they would not have been sitting at high back chairs around the dining room table. Instead they lay down on the floor beside the food, and ate as they were lying there.

A woman comes in through the women's entrance carrying an alabaster jar filled with ointment. She stands just behind Jesus' feet, and then she begins to cry. The tears fall on Jesus' feet. After a while she kneels down to wipe away the tears with her hair. Then, kneeling there, she kisses Jesus' feet and pours the ointment on them.

In Jesus' day ordinary hospitality required welcoming a guest to your home with a kiss (this is still done in the Middle East today. We often see dignitaries greet each other by offering a kiss on each side of the face). Then the host was supposed to provide water and wash the guests feet. With all the heat and sand of that area washing feet was both cleansing and refreshing.

Finally the host was to pour some ointment on the guest's head to cool him from the heat. For some reason the Pharisee who invited Jesus to dinner, didn't provide those amenities to him.

II

Rather than being embarrassed by not offering hospitality, the host laughs to himself. "They say this Jesus is a prophet, but if he really were a prophet he would realize what kind of a woman this is touching him." She is a sinner, and everybody knows it.

The Pharisees assumption is that everybody who had a clue about his woman's reputation shouldn't be caught dead in her sight. If someone's a sinner you reject them and get as far away as possible from them. You make a judgment and then get away in order to keep yourself pure before God.

III

Jesus response is surprising. Rather than judge her, or run from her, he welcomes this woman. In fact, he compliments her, praises her actions and offers her forgiveness.

Then he points out the irony – his host, a religious leader, did not offer him the basic hospitality that is expected, but this “sinner” did. She washed his feet with her tears, dried them with her hair, kissed him, and anointed him with oil. What the Pharisee failed to offer, the sinner provided. And she offered them to Jesus not as routine acts, but with real feeling. Then Jesus tells a parable about one who is forgiven a little and another who is forgiven much.

IV

Can you imagine what this woman is thinking as she approaches the Pharisees home? Inside are two rabbis – holy men – how will she be received by them? Will they know who she is and her reputation? If they do, how will they react? Will they condemn her? Chastise her? Chase her away?

She has to realize that going into this home involves great risk. But she goes ahead anyway.

One of the rabbis judges her, rejects her. The other welcomes her. Apparently realizing that she has come for help, he reaches out to her as if to say, “I’ve come for those who know they need and want help.”

Fred Craddock defines her situation well when he writes, “The one place where she is welcome is the street, among people like herself. What she needs is a community of forgiven and forgiving sinners. The story screams the need for a church, not just any church, but one that says, ‘you are welcome here.’”

V

Can we be that kind of church, that reaches out to help? The foundation of that welcoming attitude is in realizing that we are “forgiven and forgiving sinners.”

It is hard to condemn someone when you realize that you also are a sinner, and that you have been forgiven. When we have received forgiveness we are able to offer forgiveness.

What are the ways in which we can open our church family to welcome people whom we consider different, those who are disapproved of, and those who are looking for help? How can we extend the care of Christ to those who are disenfranchised?

It helps to have a broad view of who God’s people are. The children of God are not just our friends, the people we like, or those with whom we are comfortable. They are all human beings created by God. Remember Jesus’ words, “Judge not that you be not judged. For the measure with which you judge will be the measure by which you are judged.”

Are we able to welcome those who come to us looking for God’s help?

Conclusion

A couple of years ago, a man from the group home nearby showed up for worship. Members of that home had come here before, so it wasn't a completely new experience for us. But this man began swearing out loud in the middle of the worship service.

Some people were very uncomfortable, obviously, because it was offensive. Suggestions were made that we should contact the group home and ask them not to send anyone here unless they were chaperoned by someone from the home. Others thought we could just tolerate this situation whenever it happened, which hopefully wouldn't be very often, because, after all, he really didn't know what he was doing.

Does the situation, which Jesus experienced, offer us help in how we could have responded to the man from the group home?

Is there a clue in that passage about what we might do?

Amen.