

Rev. Phil Blackwell • Sunday, June 12, 2016
Text: Luke 7:36-8:3

Where We Belong



First United
Methodist Church

DOWNTOWN FOR GOOD

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She was not invited to the supper, the woman in Luke's account of what happened at Simon's house. We do not know her name, as is the case with most women in the Bible, but only that she is a "sinner," or more specifically in some texts, a "harlot." She appears in all four gospels, but in the other three she comes into the story very near the end, bathing Jesus in expensive perfume as if to prepare him for his death and burial. In Luke's rendering, she is present near the start of Jesus' ministry.

Simon, a Pharisee, invites Jesus to dinner. He accepts the invitation; Jesus is not opposed to being seen in the company of Pharisees, or even at their table. After all, as a devout Jew, Jesus shares their religious heritage. We need to imagine that the two did not dine alone. There may have been other guests, but it also was true that there would have been onlookers peering through the open doors and maybe even lining the walls of the room. Privacy was not a value in biblical times, and Jesus certainly would have had a following.

As Simon and Jesus are reclined on the floor and eating off a low table, this sinful woman throws herself at Jesus' feet and weeps. She drenches his feet with her tears and then uses her long tresses of hair as a towel. She takes her alabaster jar of ointment and begins to anoint his feet. Simon is appalled, and Luke imagines him thinking, "If Jesus truly is the prophet everyone says that he is, he would know what kind of woman this is and move away from her."

Jesus senses Simon's disapproval and says, "Simon, let me tell you something. Two people owe a creditor money; one 50 denarii, the other 500 denarii. Neither one is able to pay the debt, so the creditor forgives both. Now, which debtor will be more grateful, the one who owes the small amount or the one who owes ten times that?"

Simon says, "I suppose the one who owes the larger amount."

"Right," replies Jesus. "Now, see this woman, a woman of the streets, one who knows her sins without others having to chastise her . . . when I entered your house, you gave me no water to wash the dust of the road off my feet, but she bathed them with her tears and wiped them dry with her hair. You gave me no kiss of welcome, but she has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with expensive perfume. She has the greater sins, but she also has the greater love." And then, Jesus turns to her and says, "Your sins are forgiven; go in peace."

Because the woman seeks out Jesus, an indication of her desire to be forgiven and to lead a new life, and because her hospitality is more genuine and generous than that of the host, Simon, she belongs in the room. Whether Simon does is not stated clearly, though let us give him the benefit of the doubt and assume that he gets the point. Being accepted as we are opens us to the possibility of changing our ways, growing in faith and loving action. Christian faith is not a matter of "if-then," if you repent, then you will be forgiven. No, it is "because-therefore," because you have been forgiven, therefore you are free to live a new life. (Raymond Schwager in the Girardian commentary).

We here at First Church have written into our mission statement that we seek to embody hospitality in the manner of Jesus. It is the radical hospitality of accepting each other as each one is and belonging to a community of people seeking to live faithful lives.

A sociologist named Diana Butler Bass has documented the importance of hospitality for the health of a religious community (*Christianity for the Rest of Us*). She argues in her book entitled, *Christianity after Religion*, that the old time religion is dead. That was the pattern of, first, believing; do I accept the creeds of the ancient Church and affirm the Trinitarian formula? And then, after believing, behaving; do I act as a good Christian should, attending worship, giving generously, not sinning, and sharing my beliefs with others? And finally, after believing and behaving, after having passed the entrance test, I can belong to the Christian community, become a member of the church.

That sequence no longer is compelling, she argues. For vital congregations today the flow is just the opposite. It is not believe-behave-belong, but belong-behave-believe. God's radical hospitality, the unconditional love of Jesus, and the extravagant encouragement of the Holy Spirit combine to invite someone to belong, that permit the sinner to come to the table, as Luke's account dramatizes.

So, think about this congregation. Do we embody hospitality in the manner of Jesus? We do offer hospitality in the form of bread, a loaf of bread to first-timers in worship, or second- and third-timers, if the bread supply permits. It is purely symbolic, but it is a good symbol, Jesus, the Bread of Life, with cinnamon frosting or without.

Occasionally, I will ask you before the prayers to turn and greet one another in the name of Christ. I do not do it every Sunday because I have been told by half of any congregation, the introverts, that this is the most anxiety-producing

moment in the worship service. I understand that, and I am not asking you to bond with the stranger next to you. Simply, in the name of Christ acknowledge that the person is not an outsider, even if you just nod your head and smile.

Do we accept one another as belonging here, not just on Sunday morning, but throughout the week, and not just in this place, but within this community of believers? For true belonging leads to behaving . . . serving the needy, visiting the sick, studying the Word of God, making music in worship, praying quietly in private, living at work and home in harmony with God's expectations. And then, maybe we can figure out what we believe. How do we put our sense of belonging and our commitment to behaving into concepts that interpret the world and our place within it? My hunch, my own experience, is that our beliefs change over the years, becoming more complex, less dogmatic, increasingly inclusive.

Belong, behave, believe . . . we see that sequence in the lives of the children of this congregation. Today we sang, "This, this is where children belong" as they came forward at Tina's invitation. The willingness with which children accept the invitation to come forward and sit on the steps of the chancel is an indicator of their sense of belonging. And Tina does an extraordinary job of embracing them as members of the community. You and I have heard "children's sermons" elsewhere which have been nothing but excuses to use children for the enjoyment of the adults. Or we have heard comments to children that are completely over their heads, and even over our heads as adults, if we are honest. Here Tina talks with them lovingly and genuinely, and there have been many times when I almost added to my sermon, "As Tina said to the children a short while ago . . ." She has a gift of making the central message of that day's scripture real for the children.

The children belong here, and they know it. Thank you, Tina, thank you Chelsie and Jennifer, thank you teachers, and thank you parents. As we reimagine our ministry with children and families, we will do it with the intention of opening the doors even wider to all who seek to enter.

I read it in the statements that the members of the Confirmation Class wrote this spring. Most of the young people were not sure what they believed, but they were certain that they belonged. In many ways they affirmed their sense of being accepted by the congregation, especially as seen in Seth's love and the devotion of the adult mentors.

I also saw it in the scholarship essays our high school students presented to the Alton - Van Dyke Scholarship Committee. The committee did not say, "For \$500 recite the Apostles Creed from memory; now, for \$1000 explain the Nicene Creed; finally, for \$1500 summarize Athanasius' opposition to Arius that led to the charge of heresy." No, the focus was not on believing, but first on belonging. "How do you experience being part of the First Church community?" And then, on to behaving, especially eliciting stories about mission work on their Appalachian service projects and their evolving understanding of the dynamics of race and racism in our culture when they experienced life at the Koinonia Farm in Americus, Georgia. Believing will follow.

Belong – behave – believe, in that order, suggests Diana Butler Bass, is the way faith is best apprehended, apprehended long before comprehended, and it begins with hospitality, hospitality in the manner of Jesus and radical hospitality personified by the woman anointing Jesus' feet, resulting in her sins being forgiven so that she might go and live a new life, behaving righteously and believing fervently.

Perhaps you can remember a time when you were the recipient of radical hospitality and what a difference it made. Years ago, when our children were pre-school age, we took the fabled family camping trip to the Rocky Mountains. You know, each year when "National Lampoon's Vacation" shows up on television I watch it, not as a comedy, but as a travelogue. Our trip was like that except that we did not have Aunt Edna strapped to the roof of the car.

In those early days of ministry I did not make enough money to qualify for a credit card, and we had no savings. So, we took out almost all of our cash from the checking account, borrowed a tent, packed up our Nash Rambler, and headed up and over on Interstate 90 to camp our first night in southwestern Minnesota in a downpour. The second night a tornado skirted the campsite in Mitchell, South Dakota, and ripped the tent. We stopped in the Badlands, and on our way to Rapid City the alternator light began flashing on the dashboard. We stopped at a service station, and the mechanic said that it could be the alternator or the regulator. He did not have an alternator, but he said he should install a new regulator. He did; an unexpected expense. As we left he said, rather ominously, "If that light comes on a gain, it's the alternator. Don't turn off your car because you may not get it started again."

We stayed that night in a motel in Rapid City, another unexpected expense, and dried out all of our equipment in the room. Then, as we drove through the Black Hills the light came on again. So, Sally and I took turns getting the kids out of the car to take them to the scenic overlooks, while keeping the car running.

That evening we came down a hill into Gillette, Wyoming, and stopped at the first motel we saw. We were defeated. Along the way Sally and I had been recalculating our finances, and we were close to running out of money because of the new regulator, the now-needed alternator, and staying in motels instead of camping. We would have to turn around and head home after getting the car fixed – no Yellowstone, no Grand Tetons, no Bryce, Zion, or north rim of the Grand Canyon.

I walked into the motel office where the owner said he had a room for us for \$25. Certainly, that is a bargain these days, but forty years ago when Motel 6 was \$6 everything in Gillette was inflated because it was a petroleum boom town. Twenty-five dollars would break us. It broke me, and I started to cry right there at the check-in desk in front of the owner.

I shared with him our tale of woe. He said that we were in luck because there was a junk yard across the highway, and I could go over there in the morning to search for a used alternator. He urged me to get a good night's sleep.

In the morning I got the alternator installed, paid for it, leaving us with just a little over \$25 for the room, hoping we could make it home that day in non-stop retreat. I walked into the motel office, took out my wallet, and the owner said, "That's okay; I'm not charging you for the room. And here, take this envelope." I opened it, and inside was \$100 in cash, the equivalent of about \$1000 today. And I broke down and cried again. It was enough to keep us going. "Hey, kids, want to see a geyser?"

Generous hospitality . . . it made all the difference in the world. We made it all the way from Yellowstone to Canyon de Chelly before the alternator light began to flash again. But that motel owner's generosity, treating us as if we were members of his family, treating us not as incompetent outsiders but inviting us inside to "the table," so to speak . . . it was a way of assuring us that we were not alone, not stranded, that we belonged, at least for that moment.

Years later I tried to find him in order to thank him. I contacted the Gillette newspaper, I called the local United Methodist Church; no one knew where he went. The motel no longer was there; the town had widened the road. All I could do was to "go and do likewise." Belonging leads to behaving, and in these decades of ministry since that moment of belonging I have behaved by listening very carefully to people in need. Yes, sometimes the pleas are not authentic, and sometimes I have been fooled. But once I was there without anywhere to turn, and I was set free by the generous inclusion of another.

What has that experience led me to believe? That people basically are good; that we all are in this together; that what I possess sometimes can be best used for the common good rather than my own comfort; that sometimes God turns the tables on us to keep us humble, and we who so often see ourselves as the Pharisees in charge, sometimes are the ones in greatest need. And God often works in the strangest ways, through the radical hospitality of a motel owner in Gillette, Wyoming.

Belonging, behaving, believing. So be it. Amen.