

A Sermon delivered by The Rev. Ronald W. Botts, Minister for Pastoral Care at The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, 11th Sunday in Ordinary Time, June 17, 2007. Dedicated to the glory of God!

“Strange Tablemates”
Galatians 2:15-21; Luke 7:36-8:3

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Let us pray: O God, may your Word speak to our hearts today. Amen.

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The Gospel lesson for today is often known by the heading, “The Sinful Woman Who Was Forgiven” or something of the like. If you’re not aware of it, these divisions common to most Bibles are not from the ancient text itself, but have been created by editors as a handy way of summarizing passages for the reader. Titles make searching for a particular story much easier because you can skim quickly through the text until you find the right one. They’re convenient, but not sacred. Sometimes they fit well, but not always—at least to my interpretation of what’s important.

“The Sinful Woman Who Was Forgiven.” Well, that’s true. Our lesson for today tells that story and it’s a wonderful assurance that our sins can be lifted from us. Besides Jesus, the main characters in this story are the woman with the jar and Simon the Pharisee. The title could go with the situation of either of these people because Jesus addresses both of them. It might as easily be called “The Man Who Thought He Was Better Than Others,” because that is the additional theme of the lesson.

Jesus is invited by Simon (a different Simon than the disciple Peter) to his house. While there at the table a woman comes into the room, perhaps through an open courtyard or simply stepping in

from the street. Houses in those days were much easier to enter than homes of today with their complex locks and security systems. The unnamed woman doesn't just stumble in by happenstance, but it's clear that her entry is intentional and planned. She knows full well where Jesus is and she has brought a jar filled with costly ointment.

Simon protests her being there, though he doesn't seem to be particularly surprised that an unknown woman suddenly appears in his dining room. What he **is** concerned about is that her actions are inappropriate and unacceptable. Simon thinks to himself that, if Jesus is the kind of prophet that others claim, then he should know that the woman should be denounced and sent away. Jesus, instead, doesn't withdraw his feet. He lets her clean them with her tears and, further, allows her to soothe them with scented oil.

Simon regards all this as wrong. Jesus could easily read this conclusion from his face. His thoughts were transparent: the woman shouldn't be in the home of a Pharisee and she definitely shouldn't be doing this. Simon is judgmental; Jesus is accepting. Simon would turn her away; Jesus would meet her where she is. I guess you could build a valid case for either position, but note that we are, today, a congregation of the United Church of Christ, not the United Church of Simon the Pharisee.

When I think of Jesus, many descriptors come to my mind. I believe "welcoming" would be one of the first. He stands there in so many passages with open arms, ready to receive. Today I hope also that this would be a fitting way of describing both our congregation and the UCC. We are an open and affirming congregation of an open and affirming denomination.

If you're a person of good will—or even trying to be—we're glad to sit with you at the table. We don't look for ways of excluding persons, but we are intentionally inclusive. We're not big on the

concept of litmus tests to determine who should be here or not. We may be PC, but we're not FC—*i.e.* faith correct, when faith is defined and determined by some hierarchical elite. We're not threatened by the differences represented in our members, but instead delight in the diversity that we bring.

Some of you are here because of these very reasons. You found intolerance elsewhere or even suffered discrimination because of who you are. You were hurt by a church that professed the love of Jesus Christ, then let you know that this didn't include you. Perhaps you journeyed quite a while before God's love finally lead you here.

Last week we were challenged and motivated in the sermon by one of the ordained members of First Church who is now serving on the denominational staff. That particular pastor was removed from the clergy roster of his former denomination because he didn't fall on the on "right" side of the orientation issue. They thought he was great minister except for that.

If we're to add some additional dialogue in keeping with our Gospel lesson today, it might go something like this: "Now when the Pharisee, who had invited him saw the woman, he said to his servants, 'Get her out of here! She doesn't belong among good people.'"

But Jesus spoke up and said to him, "Wait a minute. She's Ok. Maybe a few flaws, but they can be corrected. Who of us doesn't have some rough edges? Who's without sin that he or she can claim superiority? Stay, sister, and continue what you have come here to do. No one in this house met me with the common courtesy of washing my dusty feet and here you're doing it with just your tears! I tell you her sins, which may have been many, have been forgiven. The faith she has shown in her actions has been her saving. Go now in peace. Oh, and thanks for supper, friend. I hope you have learned something tonight, which will change your life too. When your heart is ready, come and see me. I'll be waiting for you."

This natural emphasis on inclusion and welcome has put the United Church of Christ at the forefront of ecumenism. We are always ready to study, dialogue, and pray with any of the various expressions of the Christian Church. We may not see things exactly as others do, but we can feel a kinship with them because it is Christ himself who links us. We have learned that we can respect others when we disagree and can love them, even when it may be hard to like them, for some of their interpretations and stands.

Here at First Church we join with others on a regular basis. Whether it's through the Downtown Churches or Bethlehem on Broad Street, the Metropolitan Area Church Council or the Ohio Council of Churches, or just pairing up with one or more congregations for special partnership, we do it as a matter of course. It's so natural to us that we don't even think about it—we just do it because it feels right. The question for us about joining hands is not “why?” but “why not?”

Soon we'll be having another three-church concert with Broad Street Presbyterian and St. Joseph Cathedral. It seems like we're with those folks all the time and that's good. But do you know what **I** dream about? It's about that first choral event where we team up with World Harvest Church to sing praises to our God together. Now that would be a powerful witness to Christ's hope “that they may all be one.” Impossible? Maybe. Maybe not. God can bring about greater miracles than even this when we really allow God to lead us...and we don't get in the way.

“Soon afterwards he [Jesus] went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God.” Our congregation even with its flaws, our congregation even with **our** flaws, has gotten a pretty good start on our work in Columbus in these last 155 years. Next year, we may even be ready for Oetz and Lewis Center. But wherever 2008 and following takes us, we can't get ahead of God or go it alone. We have to bring others to the

Lord's table and accept the invitation ourselves when it is extended to us. This may provide us with some strange tablemates from time to time, but then that's the example we see in today's lesson.

That's just the kind of Savior Jesus was! That's the kind of Savior Jesus still is!