

16 March 2025
“Meals with Jesus”

Eating with Outsiders Luke 7:36-50

As I have said before, there seems to be something sacred about meals together. The act of gathering and sharing food connects us in ways that lie just beyond our ability to explain them. Every faith has some ritual meal. Even in our secular lives, meals take on a special significance, and our holidays and special events become associated with certain foods: Christmas dinners, Christmas candy, Easter ham, even Fourth of July cookouts. Sometimes the food overtakes the holiday, as for instance in Thanksgiving, where the original meaning – giving thanks – is lost in the preparation for what we often just call “Turkey Day.” Meals are just significant, and where things are important, we try to preserve them, usually with rules. A lot of rules. For instance, somewhere along the line it was decided that meals had to be eaten with forks. Millions of years of evolution, developing these brilliant gripping and lifting devices we call fingers, and then we’re told not to use them. Then someone else invented different *kinds* of forks for different foods, like it makes a difference. Then we developed complex china settings, an approved order of dinner courses, napkins, the rule that one hand has to stay in your lap, as if we were handicapping ourselves to give the food a fighting chance . . . you get the idea. And then there are rules governing the people at meals, too: seating order, who sits at the head, who sits at the head’s right hand, who eats in the kitchen, who gets invited at all. Because meals together are significant, we invent rules to regulate them, to make them consistent, and to keep out the riff raff. We read from the Gospel of Luke, chapter 7, verses 36-50.

³⁶One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee’s house and took his place at the table. ³⁷And a woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee’s house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. ³⁸She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment. ³⁹Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, ‘If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him—that she is a sinner.’ ⁴⁰Jesus spoke up and said to him, ‘Simon, I have something to say to you.’ ‘Teacher,’ he replied, ‘speak.’ ⁴¹‘A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. ⁴²When they could not pay, he cancelled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?’ ⁴³Simon answered, ‘I suppose the one for whom he cancelled the greater debt.’ And Jesus said to him, ‘You have judged rightly.’ ⁴⁴Then turning towards the woman, he said to Simon, ‘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. ⁴⁵You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. ⁴⁶You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. ⁴⁷Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.’ ⁴⁸Then he said to her, ‘Your sins are forgiven.’ ⁴⁹But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, ‘Who is this who even forgives sins?’ ⁵⁰And he said to the woman, ‘Your faith has saved you; go in peace.’

To recap. Jesus got a dinner invitation from a prominent Pharisee, Simon. Quite an honor, actually: enough to set the town a-buzz. *The Nazarene is going to eat dinner with a Pharisee! What does this mean?* Did it mean that the Pharisees are accepting Jesus now? Up to this point they'd been skeptical, even overtly hostile. Or were they coming together to hash things out? Would there be a fight? It appeared that everyone knew that Jesus was going to eat with Simon. And one of the people who heard was this one woman ... a notorious sinner. Now Luke doesn't tell us in what way she was a sinner. Those people whose minds always gravitate first toward sex have assumed that she was a prostitute. Maybe she was. But all we know is that her sin was significant and widely known in the town, which made her one of those people that decent folks had no truck with. And in the crowd of dinner guests, she slipped in without being noticed, knelt weeping at Jesus' feet, then anointed them with ointment. Too late, the Pharisee saw her, and recognized her. "How'd she get in there?" He started to have her thrown out, then stopped. He could use this as a test, to see if Jesus was genuine. Simon assumed that a true prophet would be able to recognize a sinner like that for what she was. He also assumed no righteous man would let a woman like that touch him, not even his feet. But Jesus just let her wash his feet with her tears, dry them with her hair, and pour expensive ointment on them. Jesus was either not really righteous or not really a prophet. Either way, Simon had him.

And then Jesus spoke. "Look how this woman has expressed her love for me, humbling herself, sacrificing her resources for expensive anointing oil. She has welcomed me to your dinner much better than you did, Simon – and this is *your* house. You seem to have assumed that just by inviting me you were bestowing an honor on me. But no one has honored me as this woman has, by her selfless expression of love." And then Jesus makes a stunning statement. "Because of her great love, she is forgiven all. Listen to this, Simon: being forgiven of sin has nothing to do with how good you are. We are forgiven to the extent that we have shown love to God and to others."

This is genuinely revolutionary. To this day, we tend to think of forgiveness as a limited resource, allotted evenly per person, so that we have to be very good, so that we don't use up our portion and will still have some in the bank when we die. But we are not forgiven by God because we are more good than bad (even if that were true); we are forgiven because we love, which means that forgiveness is not limited. It grows as our love grows. Jesus says, "This woman loved much, and she has been forgiven much. People who love little are forgiven little. Woman, your faith has saved you. Go in peace."

Simon the Pharisee had planned a special meal with Jesus, and this unsavory woman crashed the party. No way to get around that. She was not invited and, presumably, if she'd been seen when she first came in, she would have been turned away at the door. But Jesus had a different guest list. At any party where he was present, sinners were welcome. Good people, virtuous people, respectable people, righteous people – Jesus can take them or leave them. But a repentant sinner humbling herself before the Lord – that's a person Jesus wants to eat with.

So let us share a meal. Like every other religion on the planet, Christianity has its sacred meal. We call ours Holy Communion. And like every other sacred meal, that meal is surrounded with rules and regulations. Different branches of Christianity differ on the details, but there are rules on what sort of bread to use, what to put in the cup, how it may be served, who is allowed to serve which part and say which words, what we are supposed to do with the leftovers, and most of all – who is allowed to join us at Christ's table. Some Christian groups only permit those

who are part of their specific denomination; others invite only those who have been baptized by their specifications; still others restrict the meal to that particular local church's membership.

But Jesus has a different guest list. All who seek Christ in love and humility are invited. Outcasts and gatecrashers are welcome. As there is room in God's forgiveness for all, there is room at this table for all who are willing to humble themselves before the Lord.

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.

Lift up your hearts.

We lift them up to the Lord.

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

It is right to give our thanks and praise.

It is right, and a good and joyful thing, always and everywhere to give thanks to you, Almighty God, creator of Heaven and Earth. You were alone, and so you created a world to love. You wanted to love more fiercely, so you created us in your image, able to return your love. When we refused, you loved us still. Having made us before in your image, you re-made yourself in ours, so as to mend the love that we had broken. For this reason, with the company of earth and with all the company of heaven we praise your name and join their unending hymn:

**Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might,
Heaven and earth are full of your glory.**

Hosanna in the highest.

Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.

Hosanna in the highest.

Holy are you, and blessed is your Son Jesus Christ

who ate with the outcast, walked with the lame, touched the leper, spoke with the despised, accepted the kiss of the sinful, forgave the unforgiven, loved the unloved.

And on the night in which he gave himself up for us,
he took bread, gave thanks to you, broke the bread
gave it to those gathered at his table, and said:
"Take, eat; this is my body which is given for you.
Do this in remembrance of me."

When the supper was over, he took the cup,
gave thanks to you, passed it around the table, and said:
"Drink from this, all of you;
this is my blood of the new covenant,
poured out for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins.
Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me."

And so, in remembrance of these your mighty acts in Jesus Christ,
we offer ourselves in praise and thanksgiving
as a holy and living sacrifice,
in union with Christ's offering for us,

as we proclaim the mystery of faith.

Christ has died; Christ is risen; Christ will come again.

So, God, let your Spirit fill us as we gather around this table in your sanctuary. Your sanctuary, not ours. Where your guests are invited, not just people like us. Teach us your welcome, your grace. We would be like you.

By your Spirit, make us one with Christ, one with each other, and one with all the world.

Through Christ, with Christ, in Christ, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all honor and glory is yours, almighty God, now and forever. **Amen.**

One final thought. Do you have any idea how much courage it took that woman – the notorious sinner – to step off the streets and enter the pure and prissy home of the righteous Pharisee? 99 people out of 100 wouldn't do that. Just as 99 out of a hundred who are seeking God today are reluctant to enter our doors on a Sunday morning. Would you? Walk into a place where you don't know a soul, where you aren't sure you'll be welcome? No. We can't wait for others to come to us. Let's go to others, with our Lord's love.