***GUESS WHO’S COMING TO DINNER: A SINFUL WOMAN***

John C. Peterson

Covenant Presbyterian Church, Staunton , VA

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Text: Luke 7:36-50

Every week after the bulletin is prepared Martha, Laura and I look it over again and again and again to try to assure that all is as it should be and there are no glaring errors, though some mistakes still escape us from time to time. What we hope to avoid are the kind of minor misprints that end up creating major mirth for all of you. Our friend Jim Simpson writes of two such misprints in Scotland. The first was a typed note that a minister received listing possible hymns for a funeral; first on the list was *Amazing Grave*.[[1]](#endnote-1) How fitting for a funeral! The second misprint was in an order of service in which the congregation was to sing the same hymn we will sing later this morning, *There’s a Wideness in God’s Mercy*, but the hymn in the bulletin appeared as “There’s a *wildnes*s in God’s mercy like the *wildness* of the sea.”[[2]](#endnote-2) Sometimes the misprint is as fitting as the original, for there is indeed a *wideness* and a *wildness* in God’s mercy, an unrestrained, unanticipated, unpredictable, grace-filled wildness about the mercy of God – and while that wildness may surprise or even vex us at times, it also is something for which we should be widely and wildly grateful.

That wildness was on display at the table at which Jesus sat at the invitation of the Pharisee in the passage from Luke we heard this morning. The Pharisee had invited Jesus into his home for a meal, with no obvious ulterior motive; he just wanted to meet the itinerant preacher who some thought to be a prophet. Generally Pharisees were critical of Jesus, for he was undermining their attempts to encourage strict adherence to the letter of the law with his preaching about God’s expansive love, forgiveness, mercy and grace. For the Pharisees, strict obedience to the law honored God and distinguished the righteous from the unrighteous. Their version of the hymn might have been, “There’s a limit to God’s mercy.” By their obedient practices they could claim a self-righteous place in God’s kingdom and sit in judgment of those who came up short. Jesus was among those who seemed to come up short in righteousness with his violations of the law in associating with sinners and healing on the Sabbath, but his inspired teachings, miracles, and popularity with the crowds made the Pharisees cautious of a blanket condemnation. Perhaps this dinner invitation offered an opportunity for one Pharisee to take a closer look.

We must be cautious of judging the Pharisees too harshly, for we too wrestle with reconciling some of Jesus’ teachings with other closely held beliefs. We hear Jesus say, “Love your enemies” but we find that hard, if not impossible, to do on a personal or national scale. Can we really be expected to love Kim Jong Un or the white supremacists who gathered in Charlottesville yesterday? We pray as Jesus taught us, “Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us,” but we really DON’T mean it; we expect God to forgive us regardless of whether we forgive others. We hear Jesus say, “Love your neighbor as yourself” but we don’t love ALL our neighbors and we fail to oppose or selfishly support policies that hurt the poor and marginalized neighbors among us. Like the Pharisees we struggle to make sense of some of the demands Jesus places on his disciples. At such times it may be helpful to recall that Jesus accepted Simon’s invitation to dinner. Knowing that Simon was a skeptical Pharisee, Jesus did not shun his invitation but sat at table with him as his guest. Jesus came among us because God so loved the world, the whole WORLD – saints and sinners and cynics and Simon alike. There is indeed a *wideness* in God’s mercy that is wide enough to embrace us all! At times we might think it too wide, but God seems to think it wide enough to embrace all people – even those we might deem undeserving of any mercy.

Sitting there at the Pharisee’s table, Jesus found a teachable moment for Simon and for us. The subject of that teachable moment was an uninvited guest, the woman at Jesus’ feet who everyone knew to be a sinner. When the invitations went out, she wasn’t on the list. She wasn’t the kind of person who respectable people invited to dinner. She was the kind of person respectable people avoided – at least publicly. She was a known sinner, and most of the town knew the nature of her sins. Not a word from her lips is recorded – just her acts – her humble, loving, contrite, self-giving acts there at that table in the home of the Pharisee.

In Jesus she recognized one who spoke a word of hope not just to the saints in the city but to the sinners as well, one who healed people who had been sick and even brought back to life one who had been dead. This woman was a little bit of both – suffering from a sinsick soul and dying inside. So, she dared to crash the party and pour out her regrets and hopes in a cascade of tears at the feet of Jesus – the uninvited guest weeping for the sins of her past and present. No one threw her out or made a fuss or perhaps even noticed when she knelt to wash Jesus’ feet with her tears. The guests at the party reclined on pillows and ate in that reclining position, their feet extended away from the low table on which the food had been spread. On the floor well away from the table the woman bathed Jesus’ feet with her tears and dried Jesus’ feet with her hair and kissed Jesus’ feet with her lips and anointed Jesus’ feet with ointment from her alabaster jar. It was an act of extravagant love from a woman who was better known for her extravagant sins.

Simon expected Jesus to rebuke her and his failure to do so was proof for Simon that Jesus was not the prophet he thought he might be. A prophet would have known what kind of woman she was and would have refused to allow her to touch him; a real prophet would have rebuked her and sent her away. Or so the self-righteous Pharisee thought, this man so steeped in the law and so clueless about the law of love. Jesus knew what he was thinking – about the woman and about him; he knew Simon’s mind and heart, and rather than let him continue in his misguided beliefs, Jesus confronted him about his narrow view of God’s mercy and love by telling a parable.

A creditor had two debtors, one of whom owed ten times the amount of the other. Neither could pay. The creditor canceled the debts of both. “Which of the debtors will love the creditor more?” Jesus asked. “I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt,” replied Simon. Simon failed to see that the one who had been forgiven the greater debt was the woman who had shown such extravagant love. Her multitude of sins inspired her loving actions. Simon failed to do for Jesus the very things the woman had done so lovingly – bathe his feet, shower kisses upon them, anoint them with precious ointment. “I tell you her sins which were many have been forgiven,” says Jesus, “for she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.” Simon loved little because he believed himself to be in need of little forgiveness. The woman who loved greatly needed great forgiveness, so Jesus said to her, “Your sins are forgiven. Your faith has saved you; go in peace!”

There’s a wideness in God’s mercy that is wide enough to forgive and embrace us all – saint and sinner alike. But there is also a wildness in God’s mercy that is wild like the sea, untamed and unrestrained, a wildness that reaches out to those who seem unworthy of mercy and unlikely to be redeemed and offers forgiveness and grace and love and new life. That is the story of the sinful woman at the table of the Pharisee – a story of the wildness of God’s mercy showered upon her!

When Karen’s nephew was a little tyke he and his dad stopped at the grocery store on their way back from Vacation Bible School one day. From down the aisle Jason called out, “Daddy, do you love Jesus?” “Yeah, sure,” replied David. “No, Daddy. Say it loud! Do you love Jee-sus?” “Yes,” said David. “No, Daddy, louder!” shouted Jason. “Do you love Jesus?” *Those who have been forgiven much, love much*, says Jesus. How much then do you love Jesus? For, there is a wideness and a wildness in God’s mercy that is wide enough and wild enough to forgive and embrace and love the sinful woman, the Pharisee – and even you! Amen

1. James A. Simpson, “Holy Wit”, Gordon Wright Publishing: 1986, p.9 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. James A. Simpson, “A Prodigal Tale” in Life & Work [↑](#endnote-ref-2)