

June 12, 2016

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Luke 7:36-8:3

### Simon's Evite

Simon the Pharisee didn't use evite. If Simon would have used evite, then maybe he would have seen Jesus' reply: "Thanks for the invite. I'm coming, and I'm bringing a story to tell." Simon didn't use evite in today's gospel reading, but he did invite Jesus over for dinner—which may be more surprising than an evite in the Bible. It may be even more surprising that Simon the Pharisee would invite Jesus for dinner, when you consider that so often in the gospels, the Pharisees are at odds with Jesus. They're out to get Jesus, not feed him. That's how we may think of the Pharisees, but it's important to remember the place they held in society: the Pharisees were upstanding guys, leaders in the community, religiously dedicated. This particular Pharisee, Simon, is open-minded, too. Simon has heard about Jesus, whom people are saying might be a prophet, so Simon invites him over for dinner. Jesus takes him up on the invite, comes into Simon's house, the gospel says "Jesus took his place at the table."

And then someone else comes into the house, a woman. Now, if Simon would have used evite, he might have seen her reply, too: "I'm coming," she might have said, "and I'm bringing an alabaster jar of ointment." Or would she have replied? Could she have replied? Was she even invited? Who was she? We don't know. We don't even know her name. The story says she's a woman of the city, a sinner. What does that mean? Centuries of Biblical interpreters have speculated about who she was, what kind of sinner she was. A good amount of the speculation has been that her sin was sexual. Let us be very clear, sex is not a sin. Sex is a God given gift, a good thing, a wonderful thing, a joy. If I am making you uncomfortable, know that's as explicit as I'm going to get. There may be later parts of this sermon that make us uncomfortable in other ways. We'll leave it at this: sex is not a sin—though there are plenty of ways it can be used to sin. There are also plenty of other ways to sin.

The story doesn't say how or what kind of sinner this woman is. It does say that when she found out that Jesus was there, she went there too. That was all the invitation she needed: Jesus was there. So she enters, and at first she just stands there, weeping. Perhaps she could not even lift her head. Her lids were so heavy with tears that she could only look down, she could only see feet. She sees Jesus' feet, and she begins to wash them, with her tears.

All of this makes Simon the Pharisee very uncomfortable. Now he is open-minded—but not in the sense I suggested earlier. His mind is opened to us. Even though we are not prophets, we get to hear what Simon says to himself, which does not make him sound so upstanding. What Simon thinks is a derisive dismissal of the woman—and Jesus: "If this man were a prophet, he would know who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him..." In Simon's internal dialogue we hear cynicism and contempt, distaste and disregard.

And then Jesus tells his story, the one he brought as a gift to Simon, a story of a creditor who cancels debts. Jesus' story is compact, and the math seems simple: one person owes a little, another person owes a lot. Their debts are both cancelled. "Now," Jesus asks Simon, "Who will love him—the one who cancelled the debts—who will love him more? Simon answers—you can hear how reluctantly Simon answers, "I suppose the one to whom he forgave the greater debt..." The math, after all, seems simple, and Simon's been listening—listening, but not looking—as Jesus points out with his next question to Simon. "Do you see this woman?" Don't

you just love Jesus? Don't you love Jesus' masterful use of irony? "Simon, do you see this woman?" Yes, Simon sees her! We know from Simon's thoughts that he sees her! And, no, he doesn't see her.

And now Jesus pointedly describes all the ways in which Simon compares less favorably with this woman, of whom Simon thought so little. Jesus notes all the ways that Simon has been a terrible host: "You didn't do this, and you didn't do this, and you didn't do this," Jesus says. I hear here echoes of Jesus' telling another story, in another gospel. In Matthew 25, when Jesus tells the parable of the great judgement, Jesus has a similar, pointed, repetition. Jesus says there: "You did not welcome... You did not feed... You did not do it to the least of these... You did not do it to me..."

Jesus tells Simon: "You did not see this woman." We can see that. But I'm not sure we see Simon, either. We won't see Simon—and we won't see ourselves, either—until we do the math again. I'm talking about the math from the story that Jesus told about the two debtors, the math that seemed so simple. It would appear, wouldn't it, that Simon is the debtor who owed 50 denarii, while the woman is the one who owed 500. Simon owed less, and the woman owed more. But then again, while the woman is identified as a sinner, after that, Simon is the one who does all the sinning: his distasteful, dismissive, derisive interior dialogue; his reluctance in responding to Jesus, his aversion to acknowledging his wrong; his lack of hospitality to Jesus and to others; his not washing others' feet... We have words about that from Jesus, too: "You also ought to wash one another's feet."

Who is the greater debtor, and who is the lessor? It may be more complicated than it first appears in this story, but actually, according to gospel math, it's not complicated at all. According to gospel math—which is after all, very simple—according to gospel math, it's not about who owes more. We all owe more. We're all great debtors: licentious men and judgmental women, gossiping boys and bullying girls, all the things we've done, all the things we've left undone, all the ways we are more interested in pointing out the sin of others than examining our own selves. There's a masterful irony to the story of Simon the Pharisee and the woman of the city: for as we listen, as we are disgusted by Simon—we find ourselves being Simon, feeling superior to others!

Is that not how it goes, when we assume that we are the host? How, when we do that, how open we are to internal dialogues about how we are better than others. We are upstanding people. We bear no ill will to anyone—except for those few people who get under our skin. We don't slander—we just share suggestive comments that might be of interest to other people. We don't steal—we just take things they had too much of, that no one wanted, that they were going to give us anyway. Are we uncomfortable? Can we talk about sex instead?

Jesus, the prophet, the proclaimer of the good news, the curer of evil spirits and infirmities, Jesus knows what we are thinking. Jesus knows why we are weeping—if we can but be honest with ourselves. And Jesus says that all we've done, and all we've left undone, with the sign of the cross, Jesus says, "Your sins are forgiven." That's the story that Jesus tells us, with his life, and death and his resurrection. And then Jesus has a question for us. Jesus' question is not, "who is the greater debtor?" That's not the question Jesus asked Simon, about the two debtors. The question Jesus asks Simon is, "Who will love him more?"

Who will love more? Will you love more? That's Jesus invitation, and he is the host, he is the one who takes his place at the table, of this house, his house. He is the one who invites us to dine here, to receive very nourishment we need to reply to his invite, his evite, his re-vite: love more, forgive more, go and sin no more.