

## "A STRANGE AND WONDERFUL ENCOUNTER"

Growing up, my family spent Thanksgiving and Christmas at my grandparent's house in Indianapolis. The family meal was a big deal. My Aunt Claire always brought the turkey, and when we sat down to eat my grandfather would offer the blessing. The adults were at the dining room table and the kids were at the card table at the other end of the room. I never felt any resentment or realized that I was left out when I was younger, but as I grew older I wanted to be a part of the "adult" conversation. I remember vividly the first time I was invited to sit at the adult table. I missed my cousins, but not enough to give up this new privilege. Table fellowship is an important part of human interaction. We are deliberate about who we invite to dinner and who sits where.

Many of you have been through this. Your daughter is dating a young man. "Dad, can I invite Ted to dinner on Friday night?" Your ears perk up. What does this mean? Who is this stranger coming to our table and into our lives? It is the first week on a new job. You wonder if you will like your new colleagues. Then someone says, "Hey, some of us are going out for lunch today. Would you like to join us?" You think that there might be friends here after all. Boundaries are erected around the table and rightly so. After all, the table is a place of intimacy, for the sharing of food together is an intimate act. The family meal is a sort of sacrament of family life, and outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. The familiar 23rd Psalm sings, "*You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.*" The psalmist knows that the one who will invite you to the table is the one who will stick with you through thick and thin, even when you are threatened by your enemies.

For the Jew, every meal was a religious custom. We get our custom of saying a blessing, grace before meals from the Jews. When you say a blessing before eating, you claim the dinner table as a place of divine grace and revelation. "God is great, God is good, let us thank God for our food" is a very Jewish prayer. If you want to know God, Israel says you don't have to go to a mountaintop. All you have to do to discover the love is God is to consider the food on your table and who you will share it with. So today's gospel puts us at the table with Jesus. Jesus is the guest of a man named Simon, a religious person, a Pharisee who spends much of his day studying God's word and attempting to put his religion into practice in everyday life.

The blessing had been offered, and then the conversation begins. Jews were often members of religious societies that met regularly for meals and for religious conversation. Maybe that is what is happening at Simon's house. They do seem to be discussing religions, and as I said, Simon was a Pharisee. All goes well until a woman enters. Luke describes her as a "woman of the city." She comes in and falls upon Jesus, letting down her hair, kissing Jesus' feet, anointing his tired feet with oil and hair. This is more than Simon can take. It isn't just that this woman has violated social propriety. In fact, as Jesus notes, she is showing kind hospitality. It was customary when a guest entered your house, to offer a kiss of welcome, to wash the guest's feet as a sign of hospitality. The problem is religious. "If this man were a real prophet," Simon says to himself just loud enough for everyone at the table to hear, "he would be able to see what sort of woman she is...a sinner!"

What are prophets for if they are not able to recognize real sin when it occurs, to point to the boundaries between the holy and unholy, the righteous and the unrighteous? If Jesus were really a prophet he would be able to see. Jesus tells them a parable. One man owed his creditor a small sum. Another owed a great sum. The creditor forgave both debts. Think now Simon, which one would be the most grateful? Then Jesus turns to Simon at the table and says, "Simon look at this woman. You showed me no hospitality. Look how she welcomed me." Perhaps it is a matter of perception. What do you see in this woman? A sinner in need of exclusion or a sinner in need of forgiveness and reconciliation? Is she a code breaker who ought to be punished for her violation of the code? Or is she a person full of hunger who needs life giving nourishment? It all depends on how we look at it. Simon sure sees her in a different way than does Jesus.

I vividly remember one Sunday when I was serving my first church in Laingsburg, Michigan. Small town of 1500 people and the church was a little white frame building on the main drag through town. It was a

warm summer day. The front door of the sanctuary was open, letting the sunshine pour in. Just as we were about to begin worship, there was the roar of a motorcycle engine as a big Harley Davidson pulled up right outside the front door. In walked a man with long hair, beard, tattoos, and a leather jacket and pants. The surprised usher handed him a bulletin, and he sat toward the back of the sanctuary. I could feel the discomfort of the congregation throughout the entire service. Who was this stranger and what was he doing here? At the end of the service I went straight toward him to make sure that someone told him he was welcome. I asked what brought him to us and he said, "I just saw the open door and stopped." He shook my hand, got on his Harley and rode off.

I remember one Sunday at East Church when a couple of men, I had not seen before, came to worship. We often had lots of visitors but very few men in dresses. I talked to them afterward, and they told me of their visit to the Catholic Church. When the priest, with full liturgical garb, came down the aisle swinging the censor filled with incense, one of them said to the priest, "Honey I love the dress, but did you know that your handbag is on fire?" We really did have two transvestites visit and I was pleased with the way my congregation reacted. They welcomed them even in the midst of their discomfort. **It is one of those times when we have to remember that this is not our church, but Christ's church.**

Table fellowship is a big part of Family Promise. For those of you not familiar with the program, when we host our week, we have homeless families with us evening and overnights. Volunteers bring in the evening meal and everyone sits down to eat together. It is a meal of significant religious experience, even though no religion is discussed. We train our volunteers not to push their own religious agenda as the guests will come in contact with hundreds of volunteers from different faith traditions. So we are witnessing to our faith without words in the very act of providing hospitality. If this were first century Palestine, we would be washing their feet and greeting them with a kiss. I am glad we can just provide a nice meal.

My project for my Doctor of Ministry degree at The Chicago Theological seminary was to try and measure the impact of this program on individuals and the church I was then serving. My hypothesis is that the face to face fellowship, in mainly suburban congregations, changes the way they understand ministry. I found through in depth interviews with members that it did have a profound impact on their faith and world views. It is pretty hard to ignore people when you sat down face to face and shared a meal with them.

I think this is true with anyone we might be uncomfortable with. For me this was especially true with homosexuality. I am in the camp that people don't choose to be gay; I believe sexual orientation is a given. I didn't come to this position because of political correctness. I didn't come to this conclusion as an intellectual proposition. I came to this position when I got to know gay and lesbian people. I remember the first person, though I can't remember his name. He lived in my dorm at Rockford College. I don't know why he trusted me with his secret. I was an active young Republican campaigning for Ronald Reagan at the time, not some bleeding heart liberal. Maybe he thought I was gay, and if so he was truly disappointed. One day as we were walking to class he said, "I want to tell you something that I hope will not change our friendship. I am gay." I remember being surprised. He didn't look gay. I listened to him describe his fear of being discovered and his loneliness. This was a heavy burden. It was clear to me that this was not something that he "chose." You would have to be pretty stupid to choose something that would make your life miserable and he was a smart guy. I was a trustworthy confidant. I told no one (except of course all of you) and did not think of him any differently. I was not at all threatened that he would try to turn me gay. He transferred to another college and I don't know what happened to him.

I think that this story from Luke is about this kind of encounter. Jesus was not particularly interested in religion, at least in the same way as the Pharisee was interested in religion. Jesus was concerned about all the people for whom the Realm of God was a wall they had to look over because they were excluded. When this woman came to him with oil and tears, compassion took over. The Pharisee was quick to judge this "woman of the city." Jesus was quick to love. Suddenly the social and religious boundaries which would have kept this woman at arms length were no longer a concern. Remember he did not seek her out. She came to him, hoping against hope that he had some good news for her. Everybody else in the room surely saw her in the way she was accustomed to being seen. In this beautiful, fragrant moment, there is an intimate encounter between two strangers in which the grace of God is revealed.