

“A Place at the Table”

“Therefore, 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.”

As a lifelong fan of the New York Yankees, I’ve watched many games from Yankee Stadium. But the games I watch today are not played at the same stadium where I watched Yankees games as a child, because the current Yankee Stadium is not the “House That Ruth Built” but a modern stadium that was built next to the old one. When the original Yankee Stadium was opened in 1923, it was the largest and most magnificent stadium in baseball; and over the years such Yankee greats as Babe Ruth, Lou Gehrig, Joe DiMaggio, Yogi Berra, Mickey Mantle, Whitey Ford, and Roger Maris won numerous championships in this legendary ballpark. But as the new millennium dawned, the team began planning to replace the original stadium with a new ballpark that would generate additional revenue and offer fans more amenities and luxuries; so on April 16, 2009, the team began playing in the new Yankee Stadium, which incorporated many of the elements of the old stadium while offering numerous amenities such as a steak house, luxury boxes, and better washroom facilities. In true Yankee fashion, the team won its 27th World Championship in its first year in the new stadium, just as it had won the World Series during its first year in the old stadium in 1923.

While there are many things that I like about the new Yankee Stadium, one problem I have with it can be seen on every television broadcast of a game from the Bronx: the empty seats behind home plate. These are the new luxury seats that are off-limits to the rest of the stadium’s patrons, and are vastly different from seating in the rest of the stadium. Instead of hard plastic seats, these premium seats are nicely cushioned. Instead of having to get up and go to the snack bar for peanuts and Cracker Jacks, waiters bring food right to your seats. And if you get hungry for more substantial fare, there are private restaurants mere steps away from your seats; and judging by the number of empty seats during the game, many of these patrons choose to spend more time in the restaurant than watching the game. While the best seats in the old stadium were always behind home plate, these restrictions didn’t exist; anyone could buy a ticket to sit in the best location in the ballpark. Today, only the wealthy and well-connected have access to these premium seats; the rest of the fans are left on the outside looking in.

Being on the “outside looking in” is not restricted to modern stadiums (and Yankee Stadium is not the only sports facility where this takes place); it was the standard custom in the ancient world in which Jesus lived. These divisions can be seen in today’s Gospel lesson, when *“one of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee’s house and took his place at the table.”* (Luke 7:36). While the Pharisee and his guests would occupy their places at the table, other townspeople and uninvited guests would have crowded around the walls inside or the courtyard outside to watch the invited guests as they dined. Such an occasion would have been much more public than dinner in a private home today, so the presence of outsiders watched as the host served his guests would not have been unusual. One of these outsiders, identified as a *“woman of the city, who was a sinner,”* is among those spectators watching the dinner. We know little about her; she is not identified by name (there is no indication that she is Mary Magdalene, who is mentioned in the next chapter), nor do we know the nature of her sin (many assume that it was of a sexual nature; some commentators still refer to her as a “harlot”). What we do know is that she has brought along *“an alabaster jar of ointment,”* often used as perfume. Whatever the reason for her presence on the outskirts of this banquet, she is clearly there as more than a spectator.

Her intentions become apparent when she crosses the barrier between invited and uninvited guests and stands behind Jesus at the Pharisee’s table. While this act must have been a shocking violation of etiquette in itself, what she does next is even more of a violation of conventional practice: *“She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointed them with the ointment.”* (7:38). Her act of washing Jesus’ feet with her tears and wiping them with her hair is an extravagant expression of love and gratitude, but it also violated social conventions; washing a man’s feet and

letting down one's hair could have sexual overtones. The fact that she was a "sinner" and therefore ritually unclean would also have made Jesus unclean through her touching him.

While both the invited and uninvited guests might have been shocked by the woman's unconventional behavior (although Luke does not report their reactions), the Pharisee uses this incident as an opportunity to make two assumptions based on what is transpiring at his dinner table:

1. He assumes the woman is a sinner;
2. He also assumes that if Jesus were a prophet he would know what sort of woman she was: *"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."* (7:39).
- 3.

In the Pharisee's mind, a righteous person would make certain not to have contact with such an unrighteous individual; he therefore infers that since Jesus has done nothing to stop the woman, he must not be a prophet, once who is similarly righteous.

But instead of chastising the woman, Jesus turns to the Pharisee and says *"Simon, I have something to say to you"* (7:40). Jesus then poses for Simon a riddle based on the convention of a patron-client relationship:

- *"A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he canceled the debts of both of them. Now which of them will love him more?" – 7:41-42.*

The answer, of course is obvious; so Simon's response is *"I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt."* With this response, Jesus' trap has been sprung; what remains is to connect the Pharisee's answer to Simon's condemnation of the woman's act of love and gratitude. Jesus exposes the contrast between Simon's lack of hospitality and the woman's selfless adoration of Jesus:

- *"Then turning to the woman, [Jesus] 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. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore, 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.'" – 7:44-47.*

The Pharisee had responded as one who had been forgiven little, while the woman as acted as one who has been forgiven much. Because Simon did not recognize his need for forgiveness he received less; because the woman recognized her need and received forgiveness joyfully, she received more. *"The irony here is that even though Jesus is a guest in Simon's house, it is a sinner who extends hospitality."* (Fred Craddock).

The contrast in this story is not only in the reactions of Simon and Jesus to the presence of this woman, but their understandings of righteousness that lie at the root of their responses to her. Luke has alerted us to this contrasting response in his commentary on Jesus' teaching on the ministry of John the Baptist:

- *"And all the people who heard this, including the tax collectors, acknowledged the justice of God, because they had been baptized with John's baptism. But by refusing to be baptized by him, the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected God's purposes for themselves." – 7:29-30.*

Simon's understanding of righteousness causes him to distance himself from the woman. Jesus, on the other hand, understands righteousness to mean moving toward her with forgiveness and the blessing of peace. When he speaks to the woman for the first time, Jesus confirms that *"your sins are forgiven: (7:48)*. Her openness to God's forgiveness and her selfless, loving response are accepted as faith, and forgiveness is equated with salvation. The result is peace, *shalom*: *"Your faith has saved you; go in peace."* (7:50). Such "peace" (*Eirene*) is not merely the cessation or absence of hostility; its focus is on wholeness, harmony, well-being, prosperity, and security. For this woman, it is the good news that not only have her sins been forgiven, but everything that has been taken away

from her has been restored so that she can once again live the completely abundant life that God wills for her and for all humanity.

- “Where does one go when told by Christ ‘go in peace’? The price of the woman’s way of life in the city has been removed from the very institutions that carried the resources to restore her. The one place where she is welcome is the street, among people like herself. What she needs is a community of forgiven and forgiving sinners. The story screams the need for a church, not just any church but one that says, ‘You are welcome here.’” – Craddock.

In the Pharisee’s view of the world, there were those who were welcomed at the table and those who belonged on the outside; but for Jesus, there are no outsiders – everyone deserves a place at his table. Martin Luther explains this contrasting view in his 1519 sermon *Two Kinds of Righteousness*, in which he teaches that as persons forgiven through the gracious love of God in Jesus Christ our response should be that each of us “conduct himself as if his neighbor’s weakness, sin, and foolishness were his very own. He should not boast or get puffed up. Nor should he despise or triumph over his neighbor as if he were his god or equal to God.” Luther refers to Simon the Pharisee as an example of one who was “pretending to be in the form of God and perching on his own righteousness, was arrogantly judging and despising [the woman], seeing her in the form of a servant.” But Christ sees her not merely as an unworthy sinner but as a beloved child of God for whom our Lord would suffer and die, so that “her faults are remembered no more. Christ ignored the form of servitude in her whom he has exalted with the form of sovereignty. [She] is nothing but righteous, elevated into the glory of the form of God.” Luther offers the contrasting examples of Simon the Pharisee and Jesus Christ as a lesson to us as to how we are to view others who seek their place at the table to which we were invited not by our own merits but by the gracious invitation of our Lord and Savior:

- “For you are powerful, not that you make the weak weaker by oppression, but that you may make them powerful by raising them up and defending them. You are wise, not in order to laugh at the foolish and thereby make them more foolish, but that you may undertake to teach them as you yourself would wish to be taught. You are righteous that you may vindicate and pardon the unrighteous, not that you may only condemn, disparage, judge, and punish.”

When Simon looked upon the woman who had crashed his party, all he saw was a sinner who had no rightful place at his table. But when Jesus looked upon her, he saw her “as God intended [her] to be” (Dostoevsky).

- “When Jesus loved a guilt-laden person and helped him, he saw in him an erring child of God. He saw in him a human being whom his Father loved and grieved over because he was going wrong. He saw him as God originally designed and meant him to be, and therefore he saw through the surface layer of grime and dirt to the real man underneath. Jesus did not *identify* the person with his sin, but rather saw in this sin something alien, something that really did not belong to him, something that merely chained and mastered him and from which he would free him and bring him back to his real self. Jesus was able to love men because he loved them right through the layer of mud.” – Helmut Thielicke.

The woman’s lavish act of gratitude was in grateful response to the lavish forgiveness that Christ had bestowed on her in not only pardoning her sins but restoring her to her rightful place at the table. We have also been recipients of this lavish grace, for Christ has also “redeemed me, a lost and condemned human being.” (*Small Catechism*). We were also “once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds” (Colossians 1:21); but we have been “reconciled in his fleshly body through death, so as to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him” (1:22). God proved his love for us “in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us ... For is while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life.” (Romans 5:8, 10). Through his death and resurrection, Christ has liberated us from sin, death, and the power of the devil “in order that I may belong to him, live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in eternal righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as he is risen from the dead and lives and rules eternally.” Our response to such lavish grace may not require the same display of gratitude that the woman poured out upon Jesus; but “for all of this I owe it to God to thank and praise, serve and obey him.” Indeed, “no gifts have we to offer for all your love imparts, but what you most would treasure – our humble, thankful hearts.”

While I still enjoy watching games from Yankee Stadium on television, I'm always distressed at the empty seats in the ballpark's prime location. I wonder if those who are not taking advantage of those seats realize what a privileged position they enjoy, as I also wonder if Simon realized that his place at the table wasn't something that he had earned or deserved but was a gracious gift from God. Simon was unable to show gratitude because he had forgotten that he was also in need of forgiveness and grace as much as the woman who he had looked down upon. For persons in such places, *"the tragic truth [is] that those who believe themselves righteous or sufficient on their own will never know the joy of receiving and so pursue truncated lives absent genuine love or gratitude."* (David Lose).

What a difference it would make if those empty seats were offered to fans sitting on the outside looking in; how grateful would they be to be sitting close to their favorite players instead of in the upper deck! What a difference it would make if instead of looking down upon the woman bathing Jesus' feet with her tears Simon offered her a place at his table, where she would be welcomed and accepted. Imagine what a difference it would make if we recognized each person not for what makes them different from us, but what makes them similar – children of God, those who have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God but who have been justified by his grace and welcomed to the table of the Lord, where there is a place for everyone.

In the words of Marty Haugen (the composer of *Holden Evening Prayer*), *"let us build a house where love can dwell and all can safely live, a place where saints and children tell how hearts learn to forgive. Built of hopes and dreams and visions, rock of faith and vault of grace; here the love of Christ shall end divisions:*

All are welcome in this place!"

Amen.