

11th SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

In the Gospel of Luke you will notice that Jesus is never far from a dinner table. It's not because Jesus is always hunting for food but because he is always hungry for fellowship. Throughout his ministry Jesus uses the social occasion of a meal as a graced opportunity to challenge some people with his teaching and to comfort others with his healing. Jesus always shares more than food with his table companions; he shares himself. And in sharing himself he is the source of conflict for some and good news for others.

Jesus is severely criticized for making a habit out of eating with sinners. His chief critics are the Pharisees, whose name means "the separated ones". The Pharisees are frankly appalled that Jesus openly associates with sinners; they are careful to segregate themselves from sinners lest they become unclean. When it comes to a choice of dinner partners, Jesus is highly indiscriminate; he'll eat with anyone ! He doesn't demand that people first mend their ways before they eat with him; rather, Jesus uses the meal as a way for them to come to him. In the context of the meal Jesus brings sinners to a true understanding of their worth before God and offers them peace through the forgiveness of their sins. In that sense a meal with Jesus is always an opportunity for change and renewal.

As a guest at a public dinner Jesus would expect to receive three customary marks of hospitality. There was the kiss of greeting which was the normal courtesy between a host and guest. This was a sign of welcome and mutual acceptance. The guests would then have their heads anointed with oil. Originally this anointing was reserved for kings to mark them as sacred – as we heard in the first reading when King David was anointed. However, this practice later became a way of marking guests as sacred while under the protection of their hosts. Finally, when guests entered a house they would leave their sandals at the door, and their feet would be washed as an act of service. Thus welcomed, the guests would then take their places at table.

In today's Gospel Jesus is a guest in the house of Simon the Pharisee. The first thing Jesus does is take his place at table: the three marks of hospitality are missing. These are supplied by an uninvited guest, a woman whose reputation is well known – she is probably a prostitute. She comes prepared to minister hospitality to Jesus and she lavishes on him the fullness of her care. Her tears wash his feet which she dries with her hair; she covers his feet with kisses; she anoints them with the

ointment. In all this she does not say a single word. Her language is in her body as she demonstrates her love for Jesus.

The host looks at this extravaganza and is shocked. Remember that Simon is a Pharisee, “a separated one”: for him, contact with sinners means uncleanness. And here is this lady of the night slobbering over Jesus. He wonders if Jesus really is a prophet if he can let this woman with a bad name touch him. That is Simon’s complaint. It is very difficult to kiss people or anoint them or wash them without touching them ! Simon has avoided all three and, therefore, has not touched Jesus.

So Jesus confronts Simon with the real question: “*Simon, do you see this woman ?*” **That** is the problem. Simon does not see a woman: he sees a bad name; he sees a whore. True, the woman does have a bad name. But is that all she is ? Because something is true it does not mean that it is the whole truth. We can use the truth about people to ridicule them and destroy them.

When we use a truth about people to make them seem cheap we hide a larger truth that makes them worthy. There are ways of using the truth to destroy the truth. And there is a massive difference between telling the truth and telling the truth with love. Simon sees a destructive truth and fastens onto it.

So Jesus tells Simon that he prefers the extravagant love of a streetwalker to **his** untouchable welcome. From Simon there was no kiss, no anointing, no washing. Nothing. He has no reach – or outreach – in him. In contrast the woman is free to show love because she has experienced the forgiveness of Jesus. “The one who is forgiven little shows little love.”

Because he is not open to the possibility that there may be some goodness in this woman, Simon is not free to *show love* either to Jesus **or** the woman. And when the story ends the conflict is not resolved between Simon and Jesus. But the woman goes in peace. She is the kind of woman who makes up Jesus’ support group as he continues his wandering mission.

In dining at Simon’s house Jesus has confronted his host with the question of how he – Simon – sees other people. That question is addressed to us also. Do we see other people in such a way that encloses them in their wrongdoing ? Or do we see others like Jesus does – in such a way that allows them a future ? Forgiveness promotes change in

people; it funds them for a new future. Let our sharing around the Lord's table help us to do that.