

Pentecost 3C, 2010

Luke 7:36- 8:3

Around the Lord's Table

Some of the most profound business of life takes place around the dinner table. Not just those business lunches where long-reaching and sometimes world-changing transactions take place; and not just those gatherings of family for special celebratory meals. Food is what pulls us together and what sets us apart. Whether sacred or secular, this is how we celebrate and commiserate, how we remember and how we mark what and who we value.

Notice how meals – table fellowship – features so strongly in Jesus' life: miracles of feeding of the five thousand, the wedding at Cana, talk of the heavenly banquet, even his identifying of himself as "I am the bread of life". At his last supper, taking the bread and wine, prefiguring the Eucharist. These examples are just skimming the surface. And – in a society and religion with very definite rules about whom one should share table fellowship with – his choice of dinner companions included the outcast, the marginalised, sinners – everyone who he shouldn't consort with, people who would render him unclean in the eyes of society.

Today, in our Gospel reading, Jesus is dining in respectable company, at the home of Simon the Pharisee. But the respectability doesn't last very long, when a stranger, a woman in the city, named as a sinner, arrives and begins to anoint his feet, weeping, bathing his feet with her tears and wiping them with her hair. Pretty shocking and intimate behaviour – and with her long hair flowing, she looked for all the world like a woman of questionable moral character and pursuits.

And as the story goes, she stands in great contrast to the host's inhospitable behaviour – his muttered judgements about Jesus and the woman, and his failure to extend appropriate welcoming gestures to Jesus when he arrived. Lots of lessons in that story for us: forgiveness, gratitude, acceptance, hospitality.

Now let's jump to the present day: to a twenty-first century version of this story.¹

Sara Miles describes herself as having been a secular intellectual, a lesbian, and a left-wing journalist, a sceptic and a "very unlikely convert." But at the age of forty-six she walked into Saint Gregory's Episcopal Church in San Francisco, partook of the Eucharist, and experienced a radical conversion. She had never heard a Gospel reading, never said the Lord's Prayer, and knew only one person who went to church.

Miles didn't discover a religion that was about angels or good behaviour or piety; her faith centred on real hunger, real food, and real bodies. She says: "I think what I discovered in that moment, when I put the bread in my mouth and was so blown away by the reality of Jesus, was that the requirement for faith turned out not to be believing in a doctrine, or knowing how to behave in a church, or being the right kind of person, or being raised correctly, or repeating the rituals. The requirement for faith seemed to be hunger. And I had a willingness to be fed by something I didn't understand. I found it at the eternal and material core of Christianity: body, blood, bread, wine poured out freely, shared by all. I discovered a religion rooted in the most ordinary yet subversive practice: a dinner table where everyone is welcome, where the poor, the despised and the outcasts are honoured. And so I became a Christian, claiming a faith that many of my fellow believers want to exclude me from; following a God my unbelieving friends see as archaic superstition."

Did you catch that last sentence – “claiming a faith that many of my fellow believers wanted to exclude me from.” Never mind that old friends and family dropped off in their disapproval in her going over to what they saw as “the dark side”, into the clutches of “archaic superstition”. It was the church being exclusionary.

From the viewpoint of a number of people in the church – Miles was one of those outcasts, a “sinner woman” coming uninvited to the table of Christ, where she ought not to be given a place. She herself found an unconditional acceptance in Christ, and by the clergy at the church, but faced some distancing and censure from others in the body of Christ. Things got worse as she developed the calling she heard from God to begin a community food pantry.

She explains, “Eating Jesus, as I did that day to my great astonishment, led me against all my expectations to a faith I'd scorned and work I'd never imagined. The mysterious sacrament turned out to be not a symbolic wafer at all, but actual food — indeed, the bread of life. In that shocking moment of communion, filled with a deep desire to reach for and become part of a body, I realized what I'd been doing with my life all along was what I was meant to do: feed people.

And so I did. I took communion, I passed the bread to others, and then I kept going, compelled to find new ways to share what I'd experienced.”

Like the forgiven sinner-woman at Simon the Pharisee's table giving her best, her self to Christ, Miles started a food pantry and gave away literally tons of fruit and vegetables and cereal around the same altar where she'd first received the body of Christ. As she tells it “We put up all these tables around the altar so that the entire sanctuary of the church looks like this fabulous farmers' market in heaven. There are icons and candles burning and flowers and beautiful altar cloths, and piles of Cheerios and potatoes and fresh vegetables and rice and beans. We offer food to whoever walks in the door, without exception. We're the people that nobody wanted. You know, we're gay people and we're poor people and we're people living on the streets. And we're old ladies and cripples and whores and little children and foreigners and exactly the kind of people Jesus liked to hang out with.”

Within a few years, Miles and the people she served had started nearly a dozen food pantries in the poorest parts of their city.

Yet, along the way, she came head to head with the Simons and other Pharisees uncomfortable with and objecting to the homeless, schizophrenic, and drug-crazed hungry people who came into the Church to the food pantry. These were not the artsy, yuppie set of proper worshippers the long-termers of the parish wanted to attract. While Miles saw this as a blessing, others saw it as a curse of sorts. Of course there were disruptions to the way things were. The church no longer looked the same; the people weren't the same; indeed they were hugely different and things just weren't predictable and orderly any more.

As I read Miles' story, I realised how easy it would be to side with the Pharisees here and there. I would've wanted some more regulation and order; I might have turned some of the needy away. I might well be too slow to realise that what I was witnessing was a great banquet of the Lord. I, too, might have missed recognising Jesus at table fellowship in the food pantry around the altar of the church –in Sara Miles and the street people, the sinner-women of the city, the poor, the disadvantaged and the scary people. I might have missed the cup running over, the bread that is both the body of Christ and material food for the

hungry. I might have missed joining in the hospitality of Jesus Christ as he stretches out his arms of welcome and forgiveness.

And so we come back to the challenge of Jesus. Simon the Pharisee's eyes were clouded by judgment and he missed a golden opportunity for grace. The woman responded to Christ with great freedom: she does what she wants to do, from the bottom of her heart, and she is free of worry about what people think about the propriety of her actions. Like Sara Miles two thousand years later.

So where do we stand, as a church, in this story? I know we welcome strangers well. But how well do we extend hospitality to strangers and newcomers past our Sunday gatherings? Are there lines drawn there, or is everyone really, truly welcome, even if they upset the schedule and mightn't look like they'd be on our guest list? Are we so busy with the tasks of hospitality (like making coffee, setting things up) that we forget the heart of hospitality, and neglect to look at each person, where they are, recognize them as a child of God (even if they are a "fellow sinner") and extend a warm and heartfelt welcome to them, sharing the bread of Christ in its every meaning? Today, as we take our place around the table of the Lord, look at the person next to you, really *see* them, and as we receive Christ's body and blood, receive our neighbours as Christ himself.

ⁱ Thanks to Richard Morley "a Garden Path" for alerting me to this story; and to numerous websites that filled me in with further information and chapters of Sarah Miles' book *Take This Bread*