

Third Sunday after Pentecost
June 13, 2010
“Guess Who Is Coming To Dinner?”
Saint Luke 7:36—8:3

Good / Bad

Enemy / Friend

Right / Left

Evangelical / Mainline

You and I are in the business of judging and categorizing. We are often apt to label a person even before giving him or an objective hearing. We tend to judge and categorize others by skin color, ethnic background, religion, or dialect.

It seems to be somewhat of an inbred human tendency and trait to label that which seems different from our selves. And such labels usually contain a not so subtle hint of good or bad – like or dislike – dismissive or embracing.

Such labeling can be subtle and go unnoticed, but if our confession at the beginning of worship is honest – you and I need to confess our willingness to label and judge.

Retired local Lutheran Pastor Gary Park, tells the true story of a former prostitute who came to his parish from another church. She came and told Pr. Gary that she was indeed a former prostitute, but the church that took her in used her to tell her testimony of moving from her former life into being more God centered.

She was constantly held up as an example of conversion. This church cared for her – but the group saw her as ‘the former prostitute’ and enamored with her testimony repeatedly asked her to share her story.

She told Pr. Gary that she was indeed a Christian, but tired of the identity of being a ‘former prostitute’ and wanted to be seen as a person. Forgiven – she wanted to move into a new identity, rather than continue to give testimony of her conversion.

She eventually left her previous church and became part of the church Gary served where her new life and new identity was emphasized. In her new community of faith she began to really feel forgiven and indeed a child of God.

As Jesus journeys toward Jerusalem, he is invited to dinner at Simon – the Pharisees, house. Lest we label all Pharisees as bad – we might want to be open to what goes on with Jesus in relationship to Simon.

By the way there were Pharisees and members of the Sanhedrin that followed Jesus. Nicodemus was a Pharisee who followed Jesus. Joseph of Arimathea a prominent member of the Council – both took Jesus' body and laid it in the tomb.

So Jesus' Journey includes eating with the Pharisees. Simon seems to be interested in Jesus and in hearing more about his teachings.

But guess who is coming to dinner along with Jesus? Answer: An unnamed woman who has a reputation of 'a sinner.'

She has been labeled, demonized, categorized: 'sinner.' Now this story appears in the other gospels with variations. But Luke's story is of an unnamed woman and she lavishes Jesus with gratitude by this public sensuous act of anointing his feet.

It seems pretty clear that she had already been forgiven. That Jesus had touched her life in some way previous to this dinner engagement.

It is also clear that she is tuned into hospitality and the purity rituals of cleanliness. She does to Jesus, what Simon, his host should have done.

So, Jesus tells a little story about two debtors one who owes a lot and one who owes little. Now which debtor will love the creditor more. 'Ding!' Simon answers correctly: "The one who owed more!"

One has to wonder if Simon gets Jesus' point, namely, - the powerful gift of forgiveness and its ability to transform a life!

Jesus and the grace he gives by forgiving this woman completely 'up-ends' the judging and labeling and categorizing. The table is suddenly expanded and includes this 'sinner' this woman – this outsider – this marginalized person.

Simon's neat categories of good and bad do not hold. This forgiven woman is full of gratitude for a new identity so graciously bestowed on her from the Christ who wholeheartedly receives her gift.

She is someone who has been saved from 'death by labeling' and gives thanks to God.

'Death by labeling' is a kind of isolation and death one has when a label becomes dismissive of their personhood. Death by labeling 'she's just a sinful woman' what would you expect!' 'Death by labeling' means the other person never gets heard because the label gets in the way!

Simon, although possibly well intentioned to meet and hear Jesus is shocked by who comes to dinner – this woman – this sinner!

Ironically, Simon has been moved from the seat of judgment to being judged. And yes, forgiven, too – if only he could see his own tremendous debt that has been forgiven!

'The one who is forgiven little, loves little!'

Our theme is Jesus' Journey and Ours. On his journey Jesus extends the table to a grateful and forgiven woman to the chagrin and protest of a judging and unforgiving Pharisee named Simon.

What does this say about our journey?

The story is told of two brothers who spent their lives being mad at each other. Both refused to attend baptisms, holiday dinners, weddings and funerals connected to each other's family. As old men, they sat on their own front porches and harbored their anger toward each other.

Each man had a grandson who loved to play baseball. They did not realize that their grandsons had met through some baseball practices and become best of friends. It was at an All-Star game that the two old brothers bumped into each other. Each man had watched his own grandson, unaware of the friendship between the two young players.

Just as the men locked eyes, their grandsons ran up to them and tried to introduce their new friend to their grandpa. Tension was in the air until the laughter of the grandsons melted the hearts of the grandpas.

Tears began to flow as the old men embraced. Forgiveness was extended to each other as the crowd cheered on the hometown team.

[Source of story: ELCA – *Daily Discipleship* written by John and Robin McCullough-Bade – 6/17/07 – page 2]

The powerful gift of forgiveness has the ability to transform our lives.

Guess who is coming to dinner? A woman who extends her gratitude to Jesus with lavish devotion! Her act stands in bold contrast to the stingy hospitality extended to Jesus by Simon, his host.

Even though she is an outsider this woman's love is neither limited nor contained. Even though she is unworthy – her deep appreciation compels her to act.

Jesus' Journey and Ours – as we travel the road through life the grace we experience from God is meant to be shared with one another. Labeling and judging cuts off that sharing and leaves us isolated from one another.

Yet, God reaches through our labeling and our judging and invites us all to this table of grace – the Holy Communion. Here we receive the forgiveness of sin: 'given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sin!' Here we receive the very presence of the risen Christ in, with, and, under the bread and the wine.

Guess who is coming to dinner? Jesus is coming to dinner. Jesus – right here and right now!

And what will our response be?

Everyday someone asks us: "How are you?" Actually – it is another form of 'Hello!' and most often we simply say, "Fine!" but what if we responded, "Delivered!"

You heard me right – instead of responding: "Fine!" what if we responded: "Delivered!" and danced a few steps.

Probably the person would think we were not fine, but just a little odd. Or maybe this surprising word, 'delivered,' would be a great conversation starter.

This woman was indeed 'delivered!' and most gracious for her deliverance.

What if we left the communion table this morning – whispering, or maybe even saying out loud: “Delivered” and danced a few steps on our way back to the pew!

[Source: Devotion from Luther Seminary by Pr. Marilyn Eaton de Veer of Grace Lutheran Church, Horseshoe Bend, Idaho – off the Internet]

For the love of God is broader
than the measures of our mind;
and the heart of the Eternal
is most wonderfully kind.
But we make this love too narrow
by false limits of our own;
and we magnify its strictness
with a zeal God will not own.

'Tis not all we owe to Jesus;
it is something more than all:
greater good because of evil,
larger mercy through the fall.
Make our love, O God, more faithful;
let us take you at your word,
and our lives will be thanksgiving
for the goodness of the Lord.

Text: Frederick W. Faber, 1814-1863, alt.

Amen