

The Rev. Alberta Buller
Guess Who's Coming to Dinner
Sunday June 12, 2016
St. Stephen's Belvedere Gospel: Luke 7:36-8:3

Please be seated. It's good to be back at my home church and preaching here for the first time as an ordained person. Thank you for welcoming me back.

I'd love to speak with each and every one of you about the diaconate. See me at coffee hour. I've titled today's sermon, "Guess who's coming to dinner."

There are many important messages for us in Luke's Gospel today. The one I'd like to talk about is "the other".

When we read the Gospel or any part of the Bible we must remember it wasn't written for people living in 21st century America.

It was written for an ancient people who lived in a very different culture. But in some ways, the more things change, the more they stay the same.

Today, I want you to focus on the fact that Jesus was dining in the home of a Pharisee, a group of people he was often in conflict with.

And let's take a look at a very strong woman who comes to dinner. For Luke's original audience, the shocking part of this story may not have been the so called sinful woman's actions. No. The more shocking event may have been that Jesus was eating with a Pharisee.

Place yourself there. Jesus went into Simon the Pharisee's house and took a seat at his table.

Now, it was typical, in those days, for people to eat in a semi-reclining position. So, picture Jesus leaning on his side at the table. This uninvited woman enters what is likely an all male dinner. She is considered, in this town, to be well, unsavory.

We don't know her story or even her name. Maybe she was a prostitute, maybe she was sold into prostitution, maybe she has no other way to support herself.

Anyway, She stands behind Jesus, weeping, her tears fall on Jesus's feet and she wipes them with her hair.

She kisses his feet and she anoints them with costly oil.

This must have shocked the holier than thou Pharisees but what was even more shocking is Jesus's reaction. He didn't push her away. It would have been unconscionable for a woman to touch a man in public and to touch him in such an intimate way.

She was a very brave woman. Jesus could have dismissed her and I'm sure that would have been a crushing blow for her.

But she risked it and He forgave her for whatever it was that weighed so heavily on her heart. Most of us are like Simon at times. Rigid, narrow minded, fearful of others.

We judge and exclude those who don't think like we do or who don't look like we do. Out of fear, we ostracize "the other".

A minister once said, " Whenever we are like Simon our life has hardened and closed. We offer no water, no kiss, no oil. At those times we are neither present nor available to the fullness of life that is always before us."

When we are like the woman: We don't live for the approval of others, we know we can ask for mercy and by grace be made whole again.

When we are like Jesus we, love our neighbors as ourselves. We welcome the stranger. We are willing to hear new ideas, to grow and change, to live more fully into our Baptismal Covenant.

We have pledged to "seek and serve Christ in ALL persons."

Take a look. Page 305 in the Book of Common Prayer. Well, not right now but after church . And that goes for those outside of our immediate community. When we follow Christ's example, we are willing to forgive and to be forgiven. We don't shun those who look different or believe differently than we do. We welcome those who live outside of our community. We are inclusive.

And that is the difference between, Simon, the Pharisee and this woman.

Simon is bound by and is a prisoner of his prejudice. He is stuck in the mire and muck of ignorance and fear .

But the woman has been forgiven. She has been set free.

Our Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry, tells a story about his parents being "the other" in an Episcopal church, an experience I've had a time or two.

Quote: "During their courtship, my father one Sunday decided to attend church with my mother. He had never been inside an Episcopal church.

It was an alien world. The Book of Common prayer, the liturgy, the written prayers, the chanting, all were new.

But he later said the most striking difference for him that day was communion. He had never experienced a chalice...the common cup from which everyone drank.

This was the 1940's. Jim Crow was alive and well.

Segregation and separation of the races was still the law in much of the land.

My father didn't feel comfortable going up for communion but when my mother went up he watched closely.

Was the priest really going to give her communion from the common cup?

And if he did, was the next person really going to drink from that same cup? And would others drink too, knowing a black woman had sipped from that cup?

He saw the priest offer her the cup, and she drank. Then the priest offered the cup to the next person at the rail and the next, all down the rail.

When my father told this story, he would always say: "That's what brought me to the Episcopal Church. Any church in which black folks and white folks drink out of the same cup knows something about a Gospel that I want to be a part of." End Quote.

I came here to this church in 2006 a stranger. "The other". I was invited by my friend, Ruth Grant. Although I don't live in this community and don't look like most of you, she welcomed me.

We have an opportunity each summer to welcome children from outside of this community to join us and have fun at Camp Create.

I photographed the kids who attended last summer and I wish you all could've experienced the joy I saw on their faces. What wonderful kids they are. They are so appreciative of the outstanding program St. Stephen's provides and they love being here.

I look forward to being at Camp Create, again this summer but this time as Camp Chaplain.

I encourage you all to sign your kids up for Camp Create and join us in welcoming children from outside of this community.

You know, that was always the intent. Children from St. Stephen's would attend camp with children who are often looked upon as "the other."

This is a perfect opportunity for you to teach your children about welcoming the stranger and seeing Christ in all people, what we have ALL been called to do.

Talk to your children about their Baptismal Covenant, again page 305, and be a living example for them and everyone in your life.

After all, the stranger sitting next to you... Well you never know.

That stranger may one day be ordained to the diaconate. (PAUSE)

Let us pray. "Gracious God, in your loving heart there is room for everyone - without exception. Give us the courage to be so at home in you that we dare make room for others. Let your world be a place of delight and homecoming for all creation." Amen.