

WWJD: Welcome
Luke 7:36-50
Sunday, January 18, 2026

Simon had heard about Jesus. He'd heard the stories of healings and miracles. He'd heard how people were calling him a prophet.

Of course, Simon had also heard about Jesus' preaching, and it sounded like nonsense. Things like the first shall be last and the last first; things like God's special favor for the marginalized, the outcast, and the downtrodden. It sounded to him like this Jesus was incredibly naïve. But Simon couldn't deny that Jesus was, at least for the moment, a hot commodity.

So, he invited Jesus to his dinner party. He'd do the guy a favor. And, in the process, Jesus would do him a favor. Because Jesus was famous. Simon figured having the famous "prophet" Jesus there would make his party the place to be.

And that's how it turned out. All the most important Pharisees showed up. Jesus showed up. Things were going great and he was basking in the reflected glow of Jesus' presence. His welcome of Jesus into his home had been totally worth it.

And then *she* showed up, and ruined everything. He hadn't invited her. She wasn't welcome. What was she thinking? She was a notorious sinner. Everyone knew it. She didn't belong in the company of all these holy men. And no sooner had she arrived than she proved it. She knelt at Jesus' feet ... scandalous. Then she let down her hair ... unthinkable. Then she bathed his feet with her tears and dried them with her hair ... that was just strange.

Suddenly, Simon found himself reconsidering his decision to invite Jesus. This dinner party that had looked so promising for increasing Simon's honor, but it had turned into a disgraceful disaster.

And what was worse is that Jesus didn't seem to mind. It was as if he didn't know who this woman was. If he had been a prophet, he certainly would have. For goodness sake, if he had eyes in his head he would have. It was more like he didn't care; like he didn't care that she was a sinner; like he didn't care that she was making a spectacle of herself; and, most importantly, it was like Jesus didn't care that she was ruining Simon's party.

Simon was willing to welcome Jesus to his party as long as he stood to benefit. For Simon, his welcome was a transaction. Jesus got a nice dinner and Simon got to benefit from Jesus' celebrity.

But there was absolutely NO benefit to having that woman there. In fact, just the opposite. She was most certainly NOT welcome.

Does that sound familiar? Does it sound a little like the way our culture works? "What's in it for me." Our culture is about upward mobility. It encourages us to seek out and welcome those who can help us, and to ignore everyone else.

Our culture is also all about me; making me comfortable. So, we seek out and welcome those who make us comfortable: those who look like us, talk like us, think like us. And, at the same time, we judge and we reject everyone who doesn't. They're from "over there." Or they're "one of those." We tend to reject what we don't understand, and to judge and condemn what we reject.

We're in the middle of our "WWJD" sermon series: what would Jesus do? So, let's ask that question here. What *would* Jesus do if some sinful woman crashed a respectable dinner party and made a spectacle of herself?

Well, we don't have to guess. We see it in this scripture. Let's just say his reaction wasn't the same as Simon's.

Simon saw someone who was sinful and different and didn't deserve to be in his presence. Certainly not someone he was willing to invite into his house.

Jesus saw things differently. Instead of one sinner, he saw two. In fact, he saw a whole table-full of sinners. But only one of them knew it. Only one of them realized her terrible need for forgiveness. We don't know what this woman's sin was. It could have been anything. But we do know Simon's sin—and likely the sin of those other Pharisees at his table: pride. We talked about it a few weeks ago. They assumed they were better than that woman. They assumed that she didn't belong in their presence. They refused to welcome her because they were afraid that her sinfulness might somehow rub off on them.

But Jesus welcomed her. And it wasn't one of those "bless-your-heart" begrudging welcomes. He didn't welcome her despite her sin, but because of it. He welcomed her just as he would have welcomed Simon if the tables had been turned and he was seeking forgiveness. Jesus wasn't worried that her sin was going to rub off on him, he was excited that she was taking this opportunity to let his goodness and love to rub off on her.

When you think about it, Simon had no grounds upon which to reject this woman, while Jesus had every reason to do so. Simon himself was a sinner, his sins were just different from

hers ... more socially acceptable. Jesus, on the other hand, was sinless. He had far more reason than Simon to reject her, but he didn't.

In Jesus' response to this woman, we see God's response to humanity. We are all broken. We are all beaten down in some way. We are all struggling. Some of us with socially dubious sins like sexual immorality or addiction. And some of us with more socially acceptable sins like arrogance and greed. But God still loves us. God loves us so much that He sent Jesus to show us how much he loves us, and to show us how to experience that same love.

It's interesting, isn't it, how completely backward Simon's understanding was. He figured that Jesus' welcome of this woman confirmed his belief that Jesus really wasn't from God, when, in fact, Jesus' response to this woman actually confirmed that Jesus wasn't just a prophet, but God's very image among us.

So, what do we do when it comes to deciding who to welcome? Well, this story makes it pretty obvious, doesn't it? We don't have to ask ourselves what Jesus would do. We know what he did. He welcomed a woman into a gathering of men where her very presence violated all the social norms. He welcomed a woman who was notorious for sin into a gathering of holier-than-thou Pharisees. He welcomed a woman who was willing to make a complete spectacle of herself into a gathering of upright, respectable pillars of the community.

If we believe Jesus is our model, as we must, then we're to do the same.

So, let's talk about some practical ideas on how we do that as a church.

And I think the first way we do it is to invite people to join us. If you find that your spirit is refreshed in the time you spend here, with this fellowship, if you cherish the time you get to spend drawing closer to who you were created to be in God's love, then why on earth wouldn't you want to share that opportunity with friends and folks you meet? I mean, we share recommendations on social media all the time: the gym we go to, the workouts we do, the books we read, the restaurants we like. Our spiritual lives are so much more important than all of that. So why not share? The worst that can happen is they say no.

And one of the reasons they might be inclined to say no is they're scared. Seriously. There's a growing number of people who have never been to church. The space itself is unfamiliar and different from what they're used to. And they've heard how scary and judgmental church people can be. Even if they might be interested, they definitely don't want to walk that gauntlet—at least not alone. So, when you invite someone to worship, say something like, "I'm saving a seat for you," or "Will you sit with me?". Let them know they won't be alone.

And when people do come to worship with us, we need to make sure they don't feel like Simon and his friends tried to make that woman feel. We need to do what Jesus did: make them feel welcome. The number one predictor of whether a visitor will return to worship with us is how we make them feel. It isn't the quality or content of the sermon. It isn't the quality of the music. It's whether they feel welcome. And so, since I hope we all think of this as a wonderful place and time to encounter God, we want them to come back.

So how do we do that? Well, here are some of the basics. First, and most obviously, let them know you're glad they're here. Greet them. If they seem inclined to talk, talk with them.

People love to talk about themselves, so invite them to do so (without being too intrusive, of course). If they don't seem like they want to talk, just say hello. Use your judgment. And don't just say hi, also say "bye." Don't just greet them at the beginning of worship, but also let them know after worship that you're glad they were here with us. Again, use your judgment. If they're sprinting for the doors, don't chase after them.

If you see someone you don't recognize and they're sitting by themselves, ask if it's ok to sit with them. Again, use your judgment. If it's obvious they don't want company, don't force yourself on them. Now, I recognize this one is tricky, since it might mean you don't get to sit in your regular seat. Well, all I can say to that is, following Jesus sometimes requires sacrifice.

If someone looks confused or doesn't seem to know where to go, ask them if they need help. If they want to know where something is, don't just point the way, but accompany them.

For the most part, what I'm talking about is just putting yourself in the other person's shoes. How would *you* feel if you walked into a new and unfamiliar place where you don't know anyone or where anything is? A place where you're worried you're going to be judged?

And in all of this—in the inviting and the welcoming—just keep asking yourself, not "what would Simon do?" but "What would Jesus do?"