

“The Way: Walking in the Footsteps of Jesus”

*Sinners, Outcasts, and the Poor*

**Luke 7:31-35**

John Breon

Brennan Manning wrote a book called *The Ragamuffin Gospel*. He got the title from a comment made by a teen-age girl after she read the entire Gospel of Luke for the first time. She said, “Wow! It’s like Jesus has this totally intense thing for ragamuffins.” Manning goes on:

Jesus spent a disproportionate amount of time with people described in the gospels as: the poor, the blind, the lame, the lepers, the hungry, sinners, prostitutes, tax collectors, the persecuted, the downtrodden, the captives, those possessed by unclean spirits, all who labor and are heavy burdened, the rabble who know nothing of the law, the crowds, the little ones, the least, the last and the lost sheep of the house of Israel. (49)

Jesus was called a friend of sinners. That wasn’t a compliment or nice sentiment. It was an accusation, an insult. Matthew and Luke both record this saying. It follows the scene when John the Baptist sent some disciples to ask Jesus, “Are you the one?” Then Jesus talks about John and his ministry. He concludes with a little parable about children playing in the marketplace. One group complains to the other, “You don’t want to play wedding or funeral. What do you want?”

The people of the time rejected John because he was so strict and judgmental. They rejected Jesus because of the freedom he had to use the good things of this world and because he associated with sinners.

Both John and Jesus were criticized for their eating habits. Table fellowship was a very important part of Jewish culture. “When critics of John say that he eats with no one they are saying that he has removed himself from the covenant fellowship of God’s people. When the critics say of Jesus that he eats with anyone they are saying that he violates the sacred

distinctions as to who is and who is not within the covenant fellowship” (Fred Craddock, *Luke: Interpretation Commentary*).

So they accused Jesus of being “a friend of tax collectors and ‘sinners.’” It was meant as an insult, but it actually described Jesus and his mission. And, for us followers of Jesus, it describes our mission as well. Adam Hamilton, in *The Way: 40 Days of Reflection*, says,

A number of women who were drug addicts and prostitutes worship at the church I serve. Most are part of a ministry called Healing House, led by a remarkable woman named Bobbi-jo, herself a former addict and prostitute. Being around Bobbi-jo and the women of Healing House makes me more Christian. I have had the joy of baptizing some of them and their children. One of these young women came to me after church recently to tell me, with tears in her eyes, how grateful she was for the church and how God had worked through it to welcome her. Her sincerity and tears reminded me of what it means to be the church. (125-26)

Jesus associated with all kinds of folks that the religious people of his day stayed away from. He ate with and spoke with and affirmed or helped Samaritans (who were hated for being of mixed race and questionable religion), women (who had no rights in that society), children (who also were seen as less than full persons), people with all kinds of illnesses that made them “unclean,” as well as the poor and homeless.

The next scene in Luke gives an example of what Jesus has said. Simon the Pharisee invited Jesus to have dinner in his home. Jesus is just as comfortable with this community leader and member of a respected religious group as he is with sinners and outcasts. Jesus arrives and, like the others, reclines on cushions at the low table, leaning on his left arm, eating with his right hand, feet behind him.

Visitors other than invited guests could come into the dining hall. It wasn't difficult for a woman from town, when she heard Jesus was eating at Simon's house, to come in and take a place. What was unusual about her

actions was that she didn't sit by the wall. Instead, carrying an alabaster jar of perfume, she went to where Jesus was reclining at the table.

Luke simply tells us this was a woman who lived a sinful life in that town. Whatever her sin, she had a reputation that would cause righteous people like Simon the Pharisee to avoid her and exclude her.

She comes up behind Jesus and she's weeping. Her tears drop on Jesus' feet. She loosens her hair—ignoring the fact that respectable women didn't do that in public—and uses it to dry the tears from Jesus' feet. She kisses Jesus' feet and then pours perfume on them.

Simon the Pharisee is shocked and horrified at this display. He was beginning to think Jesus might be a prophet. "But," he thinks to himself, "if he really were a prophet, he'd know what kind of woman this is touching him—that she's a sinner." Simon would have avoided contact with this woman in order to maintain his righteousness and ritual purity. He can't imagine that Jesus would let her touch him if he knew what she was.

Simon is thinking all this to himself, but Jesus answers him. "Simon, I have something to tell you."

"Tell me, Teacher," says Simon.

Jesus tells him a story—a parable about two men who owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed 500 denarii (a denarius was about a day's wage). The other owed 50. When neither of them could pay, the moneylender canceled the debts of both men. "Now," Jesus asks, "which one of them will love him more?"

Simon cautiously gives the obvious answer, "I suppose the one who had the bigger debt canceled."

"You're right," Jesus says. But Simon still doesn't get the point. He didn't see himself and the woman in the parable. So Jesus gets more specific. Looking at the woman, he asks Simon, "Do you see this woman?" Of course, Simon didn't see the woman. He simply saw what kind of woman she was. He had categorized her and written her off simply because of the social class she was in, because of what he assumed her to be.

Now Jesus draws a sharp contrast between Simon and the woman. "You didn't give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You didn't give me a kiss of greeting,

but she hasn't stopped kissing my feet. You didn't put any oil on my head, but she poured perfume on my feet."

Simon had failed to give Jesus the common courtesies that were extended to guests then. Whether he simply neglected them or intentionally slighted Jesus, he didn't welcome him in the accepted way. How ironic that in Simon's house a sinful woman from the street gave Jesus the service and hospitality that the host should have given.

Then Jesus applies the parable. Her loving much shows that her many sins have been forgiven. Maybe she had met Jesus before this encounter and found in him forgiveness and release to live a new life. Overflowing with gratitude, she shows her love for Jesus in this act.

"But," Jesus says, "he who has been forgiven little, loves little." Simon had been forgiven little, not because he had sinned little, but because in his self-righteousness he wasn't aware of his sin and his need for forgiveness. The woman knew she had no righteousness to claim—she was conscious of her sin and recognized that she needed to be forgiven. Simon masked his sins, excused them, maybe even convinced himself that he didn't have sins to be concerned about.

Compared to the woman's overflowing love and gratitude, Simon's heart was a dried up pond. The way they received Jesus and treated him demonstrated what was in their hearts. Jesus has a way of exposing hidden sin, but forgiving any freely acknowledged sin (Philip Yancey, *The Jesus I Never Knew* 152).

Jesus exposes the Pharisee in each of us. We try to be good people, we study the Bible, we're involved in religious activities—but we're still depending on ourselves and what we do to get us in good standing with God. We think we have to prove ourselves to God. We concentrate on looking good and start overlooking our real sins on the inside. We somehow cover them up or excuse them.

This story moves me to cry out, "God forgive me for that! Forgive my hypocrisy! Show me my need for your mercy and forgiveness. I welcome you as you give me love, mercy and forgiveness. With gratitude now I will serve you and love you with all my heart!"

And Jesus will unmask our sins, show us our need for him and pour on his love. He will forgive us and free us to live truly, openly, honestly.

After helping Simon see himself, Jesus says to the woman, "Your sins are forgiven." The other guests start talking behind his back, "Who is this who even forgives sins?" In their view, only God can forgive sins. Only the priest can pronounce forgiveness after a sacrifice has been made. But Jesus forgives this woman with a word, without any mention of ritual law or sacrifice. Jesus is God with us doing all he can to save us, to let us know that we are forgiven.

Ignoring the chatter of the dinner guests, Jesus says to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace." The authority of Jesus to forgive sins has to be accepted in faith.

Fred Craddock asks at this point, "Where does one go when told by Christ 'Go in peace'?" This woman's lifestyle has separated her from the synagogue (the church) and family—places with resources to help her. "The one place where she is welcome is the street, among people like herself. What she needs is a community of forgiven and forgiving sinners. The story screams the need for a church, not just any church but one that says, 'You are welcome here'" (*Luke: Interpretation*).

Philip Yancey describes assisting with serving communion at the church he attended in Chicago:

Those who desired to partake would come to the front, stand quietly in a semicircle, and wait for us to bring them the elements. "The body of Christ broken for you," I would say as I held out a loaf of bread .... "The blood of Christ shed for you," the pastor would say, holding out a common cup.

Because my wife worked for the church, and because I had taught a class there for many years, I knew the stories of some of the people standing before me. I knew that Mary, the woman with strawy hair and bent posture who came to the senior citizen's center, had been a prostitute. My wife worked with her for seven years before Mary confessed the dark secret buried deep within. Fifty years ago she had sold her only child, a daughter. Her family had rejected her long

before, the pregnancy had eliminated her source of income, and she knew she would make a terrible mother, so she sold the baby to a couple in Michigan. She could never forgive herself, she said. Now she was standing at the communion rail, spots of rouge like paper discs pasted on her cheeks, her hands outstretched, waiting to receive the gift of grace. "The body of Christ broken for you, Mary...."

Beside Mary were Gus and Mildred, star players in the only wedding ceremony ever performed among the church's seniors. They lost \$150 per month in Social Security benefits by marrying rather than living together, but Gus insisted. He said Mildred was the light of his life, and he didn't care if he lived in poverty as long as he lived it with her at his side. "The blood of Christ shed for you, Gus, and you, Mildred...."

Next came Adolphus, an angry young black man whose worst fears about the human race had been confirmed in Vietnam. Adolphus scared people away from our church. Once, in a class I was teaching on the book of Joshua, Adolphus raised his hand and pronounced, "I wish I had an M-16 right now. I would kill all [of] you...." An elder in the church who was a doctor took him aside afterwards and talked to him, insisting that he take his medications before services on Sunday. The church put up with Adolphus because we knew he came not merely out of anger but out of hunger. If he missed the bus, and no one had offered him a ride, sometimes he walked five miles to get to church. "The body of Christ broken for you, Adolphus...."

I smiled at Christina and Reiner, an elegant German couple employed by the University of Chicago. Both were Ph.D.s, and they came from the same Pietist community in southern Germany. They had told us about the worldwide impact of the Moravian movement, which still influenced their church back home, but right now they were struggling with the very message they held dear. Their son had just left on a mission trip to India. He planned to live for a year in the worst slum in Calcutta. Christina and Reiner had always honored such personal sacrifice—but now that it was their son, everything looked

different. They feared for his health and safety. Christina held her face in her hands, and tears dribbled through her fingers. "The blood of Christ shed for you, Christina, and you, Reiner...."

Then came Sarah, a turban covering her bare head, scarred from where doctors had removed a brain tumor. And Michael, who stuttered so badly he would physically cringe whenever anyone addressed him. And Maria, the wild and overweight Italian woman who had just married for the fourth time. "This one will be different, I just know."

"The body of Christ ... the blood of Christ ...." What could we offer such people other than grace, on tap? What better can the church ever offer than "means of grace"? Grace here, among these shattered families and half-coping individuals. Yes, here. Maybe the upstairs church was not so different from the downstairs AA group after all. (*What's So Amazing About Grace?* 277-78)

When we come for communion, Jesus once again sits at the table with sinners and Pharisees—ragamuffins all. Will we try to hide behind masks or will we see how much we need to be forgiven? Will we receive that forgiveness? Will we celebrate it? Will we pour out extravagant love and gratitude for Jesus who died to forgive us? Will we share his grace with all kinds of people we meet?