

“How ‘Bout them Steelers?”  
John 7:36-8:3  
June 13, 2010

Many years ago, Joe and I went with his father to have a dinner with a friend – we’ll just call him Gerald. During the hors d’oeuvres, Joe’s dad made a faux pas and called Gerald’s current wife by his first wife’s name. The moment was a little uneasy, but we got past it...until dinner, when Gerald –with the wrong name in HIS mind – made the same mistake. THAT moment was more than uneasy. His wife rose up from the dinner table, said some choice words in high definition, threw her napkin down, and stormed off punctuating the entire event with an enthusiastic slamming of the bedroom door. Still, there we all sat. Joe piped up: How ‘bout them Steelers?

It is uncomfortable when somebody makes a scene – be that a bad scene when they storm out in a huff, but even a good scene can be uncomfortable, especially for those who like for things to move along, as our Presbyterian friends say, “decently and in order.” But, you know, not everybody picks up the ‘decently and in order’ handbook like the woman who showed up and made an indecent ‘out of order’ scene over Jesus feet. So, we get this odd story which kind of starts out like a bad joke...a pharisee, a rabbi, and a sinner walk into a bar.

Only it’s a dinner hosted by Simon the Pharisee. As Christians, we hear Pharisee and think, “well, here we go.” But, to borrow a phrase from Mark Twain, Pharisees were sometimes ‘good people in the very worst sense of the word.’ Their intentions were faithful, but they sometimes played out as hurtful. However, before I hand down too much judgment on Simon, I can see the family resemblance. We – church people - are a modern day version of the Pharisees. We are the churchgoers. We are the keepers of the faith. We are the teachers of the faith. We know what faith requires. We know right from wrong. And, we are exactly the kind of people who Jesus tried to stretch and challenge in their understanding of God. Like the Pharisees, we fight against him every now and again – not out of disrespect, but because he is just too much – too loving, too merciful, too compassionate, too demanding –Face it, with us as followers, Jesus as Savior has job security! So, that softens my heart a little towards Simon.

Simon was a righteous man, a leader. And that’s probably why, when Jesus came to town and the other religious leaders spurned him, at the very least, Simon opened his home. “Come, and have dinner at my house!” And so Simon arranged a beautiful reception for Jesus. He was good at this sort of thing – a male Martha Stewart! He made sure all the right people were there – even the ones who didn’t want to come. And maybe you can picture the scene that night – perfectly laid out linen tablecloths, fresh flowers for the centerpiece and the finest silver - perfectly groomed waiters and waitresses in crisply pressed uniforms - perfectly chosen wines, not the screw cap bottles or the boxes, but the bottles with the corks– perfectly prepared hors d’oeuvres. Everything was just so.

Simon was a righteous man. And it was a righteous dinner party.

Until SHE showed up. Until SHE showed up and made a scene.

How she got in, nobody knows but it would not have been hard. Back in that day, when dinner parties were held, it was a great opportunity for rubber neckers to come check things out. So, SHE who was not named did. They were having a nice quiet conversation about the nature of God and post modern theology and enjoying a tasty meal, and all of a sudden, there she was, looking like trouble and smelling like the streets. It was like a drama queen woman showing up at CMF supper and making a scene. How ‘bout them Steelers? With head bowed down, and

tears causing her mascara to run in black streaks down her face, she stumbles to where Jesus is seated. By just seeing him, she no longer feels like a second class citizen. He is too much for her. Her knees buckle and she collapses in a crumpled heap behind him, her tears wetting his feet, her dirty hands taking her own hair and using it to tenderly wipe them dry. And then, without so much as a word – not one that is recorded anyway, she reaches into the folds of her coat and retrieves a very expensive jar of even more expensive perfume. And, gently, she pours out the perfume – every last priceless drop of it - on Jesus' feet.

Can't you just see the rest of the men at that table with their mouths hanging open? Can you believe what just happened? The perfect party RUINED, and Simon explodes. He is furious about this sinful woman invading his party for Jesus – making it all about her. And he is furious with Jesus for allowing her to touch him, making everybody there unclean according to the law of Moses. How could he allow this, this, this WOMAN to make such a scene over him?

They may not have had road rage back in the day, but they had rule rage – this woman broke every decent orderly rule, but Simon makes it even worse. He just will not control his mouth. He muttered, "If you were really who people say you are – a righteous prophet of God – you would know who is touching you – a sinner!" I'll bet that remark had such a bite that the room not only went silent, it went cold. How 'bout them Steelers?

As the curtain starts to come down on the party, a stark contrast is painted before us. I am tempted to bring your attention to the contrast between Simon and the woman. On the one hand, we have a righteous man standing up for what must be right. And on the other, there is this unrighteous woman pouring out her love for Jesus. But, instead of comparing and contrasting these two people in the presence of Jesus, could we consider this story from the perspective of two religious leaders in the presence of sin? Simon the Pharisee, a religious leader, has one understanding of righteousness. It causes him to keep his distance from this sinner, to not dirty himself up. Jesus the Rabbi, also a religious leader, has another understanding of righteousness that causes him to move towards the sinner with forgiveness and grace without regard to how unacceptable and embarrassing this woman is to his cleanliness, his etiquette, and his ministry.

That makes me ask, "Just what is God's response to unacceptable, embarrassing sin? Given the story of our faith, how do we know what is unacceptable to God? Are the things that aggravate us as righteous religious people the same things that aggravate God?"

Well, let's flip through the pages of our faith scrapbook. Whose pictures do we see with the caption, "The first people to aggravate God?" The same people in the picture with the caption "The first people." The very first thing that aggravates God in the Bible is when Adam and Eve decide that they want to know as much as God so they do exactly what God asked them not to. If we flip further through our scrapbook, we come to a group picture with the caption "Stiff Necked People." God got aggravated when the Hebrew people repeatedly kept their hearts from him and failed to trust him as he set them free. Then, we get to an 8 X 10 of David with a caption telling us to check the steamy footnote about Bathsheba - God gets angry with David when David gets selfish and violently takes more than his fair share. And, let's not even get started on all the headshots of the prophets who in no uncertain terms let us know that God gets mad when we are disloyal, when we don't take care of those in need, when we are greedy, when we want to hoard God's blessings for ourselves, and when we make God an option instead of our life's blood. Then, we get to Jesus, and we can't really make out what he looks like, but all of the clippings that are pasted on his pages show him getting angry when people do things like turning God's house into a money-making scheme. He gets angry when people use God's name and God's law to bully other people. He gets angry when his own disciples – who should be

advanced in their spiritual development, worry about which one of them is the greatest and who on the outside is worthy to be in his presence – children, women and Samaritans need not apply.

So, the things that make God angry are not things like sinners touching Jesus or coming to Jesus or crying over Jesus. It's the religious people, the righteous people, the chosen people who want the name "Christian" but keep the sinners out, thank you very much. Our Redeemer, the one we call our personal Lord and Savior, was called a 'friend of sinners.' It may sound dangerous, but wouldn't it be wonderful and faithful if the church earned that same reputation?

Since I began serving as a minister, it has opened up all kinds of conversations between my dad and me. He is also a minister – a retired minister – but a minister with 43 years of gritty church experience under his belt. He's got quite a few stories. One story comes from a couple who approached him, almost desperately, because they wanted to get married. They wanted to get married in a church by a minister – not for the photo opportunities, but because they really wanted God to be a part of their marriage. They wanted faith to be something that they shared. Trouble was – they could not find a minister to marry them or a church to host the wedding because they were living together. Every minister they had spoken with turned them down because they said they would be condoning this living arrangement if they officiated for the ceremony. My father had a very different take. He sat them down in his office and said, "As a minister and a Christian, if you are living together, I want you to be married. The church should want you to be married, so yes, by all means, I will officiate for your wedding, and the sooner the better." My father did not believe that their living together made God nearly as angry as the church barring them from a wedding ceremony that made a new covenant and invited God in.

I'm not advocating lax morals. Our religion calls us to live exemplary lives, but it never calls us to take the cross up as weapon to keep others away. None of us gets into the kingdom because we deserve it or have earned it. Some of us here today are like that Pharisee—good at being religious and upright. Others of us identify with the woman, that publicly 'sinful' woman. For some, our sin is in our lifestyle, for others, our sin is in our condemnation of others' lifestyles. Some of us sin in our sinfulness; others of us sin in our righteousness. Being in his presence reveals us for who we are – he looks at all of our craziness, all of our scenes, and all of our sins and instead of dropping his jaw with "How 'bout them Steelers" he knows the truth. Where God is concerned, we do not need to parade our righteousness or wallow in our sin. The truth is that he loves us anyway, and he will feed all of us. "Therein is our hope, that every time this congregation gathers—to eat together the Lord's Supper Jesus eats and drinks with sinners, only sinners." Thanks be to God! Amen.