

West Union Mennonite Church

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Text: Luke 7:36-50 (story of Simon the pharisee)

- *Story of Les Miserables*
  - This past Christmas my family went to see the musical version of Les Mis in the theater. I was already familiar with the story, not because of reading the 1500 page book, but because there was another movie of the same story. For those who are unfamiliar, I will reconstruct the scene that changes the main character's life:
    - Jean Valjean was sentenced to 19 years of hard labor for stealing bread. After many years of life lost in toil, he was a bitter man. He arrived hungry and cold to a monastery. The bishop there took a *risk*. He welcomed in the stranger, the "criminal." He offered food and shelter. The bishop didn't know this stranger. Couldn't know if the hospitality would make a difference, or if he *risked* being taken advantage of. It turned out the *risk* was real. The embittered man gobbled up food with no word of thanks and stole silverware during the night.
    - But Jean Valjean is captured. Police find him with the stolen loot and bring him by the monastery before heading him back to prison. Except that the bishop comes to Valjean's defense. He insists the silverware was a gift and that Valjean furthermore he forgot to take two silver candlesticks as well.
    - Valjean is stunned. Never before has he been treated with such kindness. After that moment he is a changed man. "*I have bought your soul for God,*" the bishop tells him. Valjean from then on lives a life of kindness and non-revenge.
  - Is hospitality always risky? There is a French philosopher who insists that it is so. If you eliminated risk -- the risk that the stranger you invited in might just murder you in your bed -- then it wouldn't really be hospitality. Nor is it really hospitality, if the hospitality is only for those who are already welcome and not for the

unwelcome.

- This tension shows up in the word host itself. A host is someone who welcomes guests or strangers. But a host can also be an invasive army; something *hostile*. This makes a little more sense if you consider that the root in Latin meant either the stranger or the enemy. What does it mean to show hospitality if we risk our guests turning out to be enemies?
- This is not to say that we will go ahead and be reckless about our generosity. Admittedly it gets quite tricky if it is not just risk to myself I am talking about, but risk for my family or loved ones. Yet the challenge of the gospel is a challenge toward risk -- something we may continually struggle with. A quick reading of the Sermon on the Mount doesn't assure us of no risk. It is already there at the beginning in the Beatitudes. We are continually challenged by the gospel, because none of us would be able to go about "real life" without some mitigating of risk. Most of us have a life-long journey learning to how to live out the radicality of the gospel, and I suppose none of us will do it quite the same.
- But Jesus is clear enough. Jesus after all *did* say if you only invite those who will invite you back, what reward do you have? We are called to show hospitality to those who cannot repay, or at least not right away.
- *Jesus' ministry as a form of hospitality*
  - Today we heard the story of Jesus at the house of Simon the Pharisee. This story comes to mind for me because during my recent visit to Honduras a couple weeks ago, I heard Mark Baker, a professor and father of one of my friends give a Bible study on this exact passage. We were at the home of Honduran friends of the Bakers in a rural village in southern Honduras, underneath a clay-tiled roof. Greeting and acknowledging another person is extremely important in Honduras. You greet warmly with a handshake and a kiss if at least one person is a woman. You might say the person's name. You would tell a person "welcome," or "come on in." Mark asked those present to imagine that someone who hosted you at their house hardly greeted you or acknowledged your presence. Simon the Pharisee broke all the first century rules for greeting and welcoming another person: he did not offer to wash Jesus' feet, he offered no

kiss, no anointing for Jesus' head -- really quite rude.

- Jesus at least had a place at the table, reclining with his feet outward. The woman, who goes above and beyond the expectation for a hospitable greeting, must attend just to Jesus' feet, for she can't reach Jesus' head. She was not invited, but anyone could still show up to a dinner and watch as a bystander. Apparently she already met Jesus, or at least knew enough about him to want to come.
- The woman takes a major risk in approaching Jesus. She takes on a major expense in anointing his feet with ointment. Moreover she *risks* ridicule. One might think that she figures she no longer had anything to lose. I don't think so, because the story reveals quite a different motivation. She takes these risks because she has great love for Jesus -- a love that comes from her gratitude for the forgiveness she believes she will find in Jesus.
- We cannot overlook the importance of what this woman has done. Each gospel has a story of a woman anointing Jesus and each story is different. Christian tradition has often combined these stories into one, which leads to confusion. So if you assume the woman is Mary Magdalene the prostitute, that is wrong on two counts: the woman is not Mary Magdalene, and Mary Magdalene was not a prostitute. In Mark and Matthew, a woman anoints Jesus' *head* in preparation for his death, and that woman neither *weeps* nor is called a *sinner*. The disciples are only upset at the expense. In John, Mary the sister of Lazarus and Martha anoints Jesus' feet, but once again it is for his burial, and she is not called a sinner either.
- Our story is set early in Jesus' ministry. But in any case, by anointing Jesus the woman of our story reveals Jesus as Messiah. Messiah means anointed one. In Luke's gospel, Jesus' role as Messiah means that Jesus is in the business of providing release: release from *sin*, release from *debt*, release from *slavery*. We are told that the woman was a *sinner* but not what the sin was. The sin is besides the point, because by the time the story is complete, this woman is a disciple of Jesus and an example of service, great faith and love.
- Jesus defends the woman to Simon the ridiculer. Jesus tells a simple parable: Two debtors: one owing let's say \$40000, the other \$4000. Both are shown grace; both

debts canceled. Who is likely to love more after being "graced" in this way?

- The woman showed Jesus over-the-top gestures of hospitality, in contrast to Simon who did not even do the *minimum*. The hospitality here is a two-way street. Jesus too offered the woman hospitality in turn. He offered her welcome, he offered forgiveness. He gave her verbal defense. In a culture where women could be invisible, Jesus asked Simon, "Do you see this woman?" Jesus cared about her restoration. Since we do not come from the same culture, I think it is easy for us to read the story and not perceive the *risks* for Jesus. Jesus nearly insults his host and risks dishonor by defending a dishonorable person. He risked his good name. No one in Jesus' day dared risk a good name.
- Maybe Jesus' risks added up. Maybe his whole ministry was hospitality. Maybe it was the *risk* of hospitality that Jesus took in approaching a broken, needy, and hostile people that got him killed. We come back to the question I posed earlier, can one show true hospitality without risk?
- There is one very important element in the story of Jesus that empowers us to take risks for the gospel. Jesus took costly risks in order to fully approach fallen humanity, in order that we might encounter God-incarnate. The risks were real. Jesus was killed. But God raised Christ from the dead. The forces of death were turned into life. The resurrection is precisely what allows Jesus to be savior and not the world's greatest fool.
  - The resurrection is not reward because it is not earned, it is not revenge or pay back, it is not an insurance policy. It is something else altogether.
  - When we go on the way with resurrection hope we are able to take risks for the sake of the kingdom of God.
  - What stops us from taking the risks God calls us to in light of the resurrection hope that we have? Just next chapter, Jesus tells the parable of the sower. Some seed fall on rocks, some on the path, some on good soil. Some of the seed never bears full fruit because it falls among the thorns, choked by the worries of this life. Worry can be a good or bad thing in the New Testament. We are called to have worry – or concern – for one another in the church. But concerns about our

own security can keep us from living out the radicalness of the gospel. A lot of Christians feel swamped with guilt because of experiencing the emotion of anxiety. But I don't think that is it. I think the worry of the New Testament is a much more intentional self-sufficiency, self-built security. Worry about one's good name, about one's financial status, avoidance of conflict. Anything that would make us pause before offering risky hospitality. All understandable, none wrong in of themselves.

- Risky hospitality can be foolish. There is no denying that. There is no assurance things always turn out well. We have only each other to trust, and the Holy Spirit, the same Spirit which raised Jesus from the dead. But that is no small thing.
- So I wish you all a sense of blessing from God. May God show each of us the release offered us in Jesus. May we consequently love like the woman in the gospel story. May we be emboldened toward risky hospitality by the hope of resurrection we have in Jesus.