

TRADING PLACES

A Sermon for the Third Sunday after Pentecost, June 13, 2010

Text: Luke 8:26-39

Do you notice how they trade places, in today's Gospel?

It's a lesson in the meaning of Christian worship.

The honor of hosting Jesus for dinner had fallen to Simon, one of the Pharisees. They took their appropriate places at table, host at the head, Jesus probably reclining on his right. They would have observed the custom of lying on their left sides, holding themselves up with their left elbows. Their feet jutted out behind the person on their right. Jesus and Simon would have both been on the long, center couch, in places of honor, and several other guests would have been reclining like them, on two more couches. The servants could come and go in the middle of the three long couches to serve the meal.

Everyone in their proper places. This mattered so much that Jesus taught humility by telling us that when we go to a feast we should be seated at the foot of the table so that the host could invite us to come up higher, thus honoring us in the eyes of everyone looking on.

Simon saw a woman come up behind Jesus. He knew her reputation, and did not like her. He saw her wet Jesus' feet with her tears and wipe his feet with her hair, and cover his feet with kisses. Simon saw, and was perturbed. Here I am honoring this fellow as if he were a prophet. If he were a real prophet surely he would not allow such a woman as this to touch him, to wash his feet, to kiss his feet? Simon was troubled. This woman, as a sinner, did not even deserve a place standing behind those who were eating.

But Jesus put Simon in his place by telling a parable and making a comparison.

The parable set the stage for what Jesus was about to do: make them *trade places*. Jesus cast doubt on the Pharisee's hierarchy of goodness: I am good, she is bad. I am righteous, she is a sinner. Instead, for Jesus, the hierarchy is exactly the opposite: The one who is forgiven much loves much, and is therefore "better." The one who is forgiven little loves little, and is therefore "worse." (As Jesus used to say all the time, "Somebody who is well doesn't need a doctor.")

Then Jesus made the overt comparison: You, Simon, failed even to *allow me* to wash my feet; she, on the other hand, has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. You, Simon, didn't even kiss me once; she, however, has not stopped kissing my feet. And then a third comparison: You did not anoint my head with oil; she, though, has anointed my feet with ointment.

Don't try to keep a scorecard for this story, because there will be a lot of substitutions. A lot of people trading places. The first one just happened. The Pharisee thought *he* was in a position

to decide about people, who was in and who was out. But now his guest took over that position. Jesus was making judgments, as if he were the host at this banquet. But Jesus made his judgment in a different way than Simon: where Simon saw only the sin, Jesus saw only tears of repentance.

And when he made the judgment, notice how he flipped Simon and the woman. He exalted the woman **as being a wonderful host!** He didn't just say, "Simon, back off; nobody's perfect." No, he went for the jugular. Jesus, a guest at the table, lifted up a woman who was being gossiped about and said that **as a host** she was superior to the man who invited him for dinner! At the same time, by three times condemning the failures of his host, he practically declared Simon a *persona non grata*, a sinner.

The place cards had been moved, at least in the minds of all who were watching and listening.

But it was not over yet.

Remember that this story was being told after the resurrection of Jesus. And who was this Jesus? He was the one who famously

during supper, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, *got up from the table*, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. And when he was finished, he said, "If I, your Lord and teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet."

Jesus was the one who overpowered the objections of his disciples to become like a servant to them, he who was their Lord, their Master, the one whose sandals they were not even worthy to untie, as John the Baptist would say, much less wash his feet.

So now the place cards had been moved again. Jesus was not sitting in the host's seat, speaking with authority, nor was he the guest. Now, the sinful woman had taken Jesus' place as guest, and Jesus was (figuratively speaking) standing behind her, wetting *her* feet with *his* tears, wiping *her* feet with *his* hair. I say figuratively, because actually what he does is wash her from her sins: "Her sins, which *were* many, have been forgiven her."

So now this woman, who came to Jesus in repentance, is about to float home feeling like a million dollars, because of how Jesus has treated her. He who was worthy of being invited to Simon's, worthy of her adoration and tears, has turned the tables on her and sent her away whole and redeemed and glad.

Now, if we may trade places in order to find ourselves in this story, we will want to trade places with the sinful woman. We are like those women who, in chapter 8:2, have been cured of evil spirits and infirmities, or something like that. Now we follow Jesus around, helping him with his

work of proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The kingdom in which the last shall be first.

Trading places with her, we find ourselves continually being ministered to by Jesus. For example, Jesus will wash a little boy today—Wade Brooks Paul, who is being baptized. Likewise, we will gather at the table of the Lord, where he is host and servant and feast. Also, we have already heard, and we will hear again, the kind of words that woman heard: “Your sins are forgiven.” And it would be well if we all returned home the way she did: fed, forgiven, whole, holy. As if we had inherited the earth.

Our Lord has a penchant for making people trade places, as the Song of Mary says: He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly (isn't that the story of today's Gospel?); he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty (there it is again!).

The theme carries through Jesus' ministry:

- In the beatitudes, he teaches that the poor will inherit the earth
- The first will be last, he says, and the last first.
- He teaches us to take a seat at the foot of the table, so the host can invite us to come up higher.
- He tells a parable about a wedding feast to which the invited guests did not come, so passersby were compelled to come in.
- He tells us about two men who went up to the temple to pray, of whom the “worse” person was the one who “went home justified.”
- In the parable about a man who fell among thieves, he gives the role of rescuer not to a religious person but to an outsider, a Samaritan.
- He tells us that we adults must become like little children, if we are to enter the kingdom.

So here we are—little children all of us. We come to church, we say, to “worship” God. We know we ought to—God deserves our thanks and praise. But when we get here it turns out to be a kind of surprise birthday party for all of us. God is not here to bask in our homage, and send us home with little gift bags. We come to God, and he . . . steps down from heaven to bathe and wash and feed and encourage us. To wash our feet, and give us joy. To look favorably upon us, and give us peace. Amen.