

# *The Invitation*

by

The Reverend Leigh DeVries  
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church

August 28, 2022

Luke 7:36-50

<sup>36</sup>One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and took his place at the table. <sup>37</sup>And a woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. <sup>38</sup>She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment. <sup>39</sup>Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him—that she is a sinner." <sup>40</sup>Jesus spoke up and said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." "Teacher," he replied, "Speak." <sup>41</sup>"A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. <sup>42</sup>When they could not pay, he canceled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?" <sup>43</sup>Simon answered, "I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt." And Jesus said to him, "You have judged rightly."

<sup>44</sup>Then turning toward the woman, he said to Simon, “Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. <sup>45</sup>You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. <sup>46</sup>You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. <sup>47</sup>Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.” <sup>48</sup>Then he said to her, “Your sins are forgiven.” <sup>49</sup>But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, “Who is this who even forgives sins?” <sup>50</sup>And he said to the woman, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.”

I don't have many memories of my maternal grandfather. He died when I was 11 or 12. I remember calling him granddad, the great big bear hugs he would give, and his soft chuckle at my inevitable childhood ridiculousness. Whenever we visited my grandparents in Texas, he would pick one morning to go to Jack and Jill Donuts. He'd always get a chocolate-covered one just for me, and we'd eat them around the tv room table. He was also a great cook. I still think about his enchiladas. I remember thanksgivings and Christmases sitting around the fancy table in the dining room, using their gold cutlery that I loved, thinking it was the epitome of luxury as a kid.

There's something magical about meals, about the memories, made sitting together. Michael Pollan wrote, "the shared meal elevates eating from a mechanical process of fueling the body to a ritual of family and community, from the mere animal biology to an act of culture."<sup>1</sup>

In the Bible, meals are highly consequential, repeatedly serving as a metaphor for God's action. From those invited to sit at the table, "you prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies," to the food served, a loaf of bread and a cup of wine. The table is often a symbol that speaks of God's promise.<sup>2</sup> Our texts today all revolve around tables and what happens there, all metaphors for God's promise.

Our first lesson comes from Isaiah, right in the middle of what scholars call Isaiah's little apocalypse. Before this text, we hear prophecies about the earth, left desolate, lying polluted, utterly broken, and withering because people have lived against the ways of God's commands. Then we come to the beginning of this section, where the author opens by claiming relationship to this God: "you are *my* God." In the middle of everything going wrong, the end of the world, the author calls out to *his* God. He calls out and claims who God truly is—"a refuge to the poor, a refuge to the needy in their distress, a shelter from the rainstorm and a shade from the heat..."

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Pollan, *In Defence of Food: An Eater's Manifesto* (New York, NY: Penguin, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> Jeffrey W. Carter, "Pastoral Perspective on Isaiah 25:1-9," in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Year A*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, vol. 4 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011).

In the middle of everything falling apart, the author calls out to God, claiming God as the author's own. And he's not alone in that inclination—following that old saying, “there's no atheists in foxholes.” When life gets unbearable, most people tend to reach out to something for help. And I am no different.

During college, I spent a summer in Quito, Ecuador, the summer after my junior year. I went there to work for a missions organization called Mundo Juvenil, Youth World. My brother and sister-in-law lived in Quito, working for the same organization. I wanted to spend a summer closer to my family and learn about mission work in Ecuador.

To make matters complicated, I was delving into the issues that short-term missions often bring up. The cost-benefit analysis of short-term missions, whether our presence in Quito helped at all or if we were just symptoms of problems far outside of our control. I wondered if I was just making everything worse by leading these short-term missions.

And simultaneously I was navigating my first and one of my worst bouts with depression. I had studied abroad the year before and, through a sequence of events, found myself indescribably lonely, questioning my worth, thinking more than a few times that things would just be easier, better without me around.

Our second reading today is one you may have heard before. A version of this story of a woman anointing Jesus during a meal appears in all four gospels, all with different emphases. Luke's version is unique in the particular distinction placed on the woman. The other gospel writers highlight the extravagance of her gift to Jesus, using this alabaster jar of nard or ointment, disciples asking whether it would have been better to sell the ointment and give the money to the poor. In the other gospels it is also closer to the death of Jesus, whereas in Luke it comes in the middle of Jesus ministry. Jesus responds in each instance saying she has done a good thing to and for him. But today's passage it is slightly different.

Simon, a member of the Pharisees, invites Jesus to dine with him. We learn later, though, that his invitation was rather conditional. Ignoring the everyday practices of hospitality which would have been expected, he denies the road-weary Jesus anything with which to wash or a towel to dry his feet. This is a host's way of saying, "it's great that you stopped by to see me; I'm sorry you won't be staying long."<sup>3</sup> It is similar to not inviting someone past the front door or front room. All are gathered around the table eating together when this woman, known as a sinner, enters the scene.

Like Jesus, the woman's reputation precedes her. "Simon's knowledge of her sin implies that, whatever her wrongdoing, it carries with it a public shame..." a shame that pushed "her to the fringes of society and left her looking up at the world from a lowly place."<sup>4</sup>

The woman comes up behind Jesus and begins weeping and tends to Jesus' dusty, dirty feet. She wets his feet with her tears, kisses them, and pours expensive oil over them, wiping his feet with not cloth or the hem of her clothes, but in an intimate gesture of love, she dries the feet of Jesus with her hair.

The pharisee says to himself, "if this man were truly a prophet he would know what kind of woman is touching him." At this point, Jesus speaks up and tells Simon a parable about debt, one we all might be a bit more sensitive to particularly with the events of this past week. In the parable, a lender has two debtors, one with a great debt and one with a small debt. The lender forgives both. Jesus asks Simon who would love the lender more, and Simon responds, the one with the greater debt. Jesus agrees. Then Jesus reproves Simon, pointing out that the woman he judged so unworthy offered the gifts of hospitality that Simon as host should have provided.<sup>5</sup> Instead, it is the shamed

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<sup>3</sup> Verlee A. Copeland, "Homiletical Perspective on Luke 7:36-50," in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Year C*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, vol. 3 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> M. Jan Holton, "Pastoral Perspective on Luke 7:36-8:3," in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Year C*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, vol. 3 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010).

<sup>5</sup> Copeland, *Feasting*.

and shame-filled woman who acts as an extravagant host at the table she was never invited to.

I imagine this woman came to Jesus, like the author in Isaiah came to God, desperate, as a last resort. And she brought with her perhaps her last item of worth—this alabaster jar of ointment meant for burial, maybe for her own. And rather than saving it, she brings it to Jesus, overcome simply by being in his presence, using the last valuable thing in her possession to communicate love to Jesus. She is known to be a sinner—her community has rejected her and looks down on her. Whatever she has done, it is clear she holds the shame her community has given her.

While I don't know the shame this woman experienced or why, I do know the shame that my depression sold me – that I was worthless. I imagine she felt something similar.

Shame in and of itself can help us understand boundaries, teach us humility, or convict us when we need to ask for forgiveness from God or neighbor. But then there is toxic, chronic shame, the kind of shame that permeates someone's being, telling them they will never be good enough.

Theologian Reverend Verlee A. Copeland writes how "Chronic shame causes one to be overwhelmed by a sense of self-condemnation and unworthiness. It can take root in a child or an adult, with any event of rejection, failure, helplessness [or trauma]. For those whose self-esteem is already tattered, it is not long before these failures make them feel as sinful and unclean as the woman in Luke's story."<sup>6</sup>

My first bout with depression in Ecuador was all about chronic shame. I felt shame for taking up space, for my sexuality, which I couldn't even say out loud, and shame about participating in a short-term missions organization about which I felt complicated. I recall one specific night. I sat on the roof deck of our apartment in Quito and wept. I was angry, confused, and hurt and

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<sup>6</sup> Copeland, *Feasting*.

did not know where to turn. So, perhaps like the author in Isaiah, I turned to God in desperation. I said to God, "Listen, if you really love me, if you're really there, tomorrow show me a butterfly. I know I'm not supposed to ask for stuff like this, but I just need something to know you're with me here."

I cried a while longer alone on the roof and then went downstairs to sleep. The next day I forgot about my demand of God. I went to the market with a friend looking for a specific piece of jewelry that she wanted. We looked through various stalls, and inevitably, I stumbled upon a butterfly-shaped ring. I saw the ring and remembered what I had asked for from God. I squinted, wondering if maybe it was probably a coincidence, but a quiet voice inside kept saying, well... maybe.

We kept shopping. My friend still looking for this one necklace. We didn't find it in the market, so we decided to try some brick-and-mortar stores. In the second one, I walked along, looking at the various table wares. And, on one table were three butterflies, the kind pinned to paper in a shadowbox. I smiled. Okay, maybe. Maybe. Then I turned around, and there was an entire wall of butterfly shadowboxes. A wall of butterflies. Okay, I thought. Okay. I guess there's something here.

I never solved short-term missions, but I learned a lot that summer about the least harmful ways to engage in them and how they can be transformative. My depression didn't go away. I wasn't suddenly all better. But I did know, from that moment on, that I was not alone. That I was loved. That somehow, some way, there was a divine being who cared that I existed, who thought I was worth something, good enough to be with.

As someone who has navigated chronic shame, I assume the last thing the woman in our story today wanted was to find herself as the center of attention. But, because of love, she was motivated to put herself in the awkward center of attention for Jesus.

Jesus eventually responds to her actions, saying to her, "Your sins are forgiven ... go in peace" (vs. 48, 50).

This forgiveness and blessing open the possibility for the woman that she is not worthless but worth much. Those butterflies opened for me the same, the idea that I was worth rather a lot. And that felt like an invitation to me, an invitation to life that prepares a table before me in the presence of my enemies—that chronic shame. An invitation to a table where we read in Isaiah, "on this mountain the lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food...." Typically, the Lord of Hosts is meant as a military term, but I like to creatively interpret it as the lord of actual hosts and hostesses, the lord of the party.

In Isaiah's little apocalypse, the climax is this meal at the table, where at the end, God destroys death and wipes every tear from every eye. And that table is set for friend and foreigner, strong and weak, wealthy and poor (cite). *Everyone*. Including me. Including you.

This invitation is the gift of a loving God. The Reverend Copeland said, "a heart that is bound by sin and shame withers and dies, but the love of a forgiving God [to which we are invited] lifts us to heights beyond our greatest dreams." While this invitation doesn't preclude us from suffering, it does remind us that we know the end of the story, where all are invited to the table of love, where God is our host. Amen.