

## **“OUTSIDERS LOOKING IN”**

A sermon by Dale Rosenberger, Minister  
First Congregational Church, UCC, Darien, Connecticut

Before exploring Luke, I pause over fathers. Doubtless lots of you have struggled with what to get dad for Father's Day. Perhaps a HyperChiller Iced Coffee Maker? Maybe a Dremel Motor Tool? How about a Discovery Drone with Camera? That way dad can hover it over teenaged daughters on dates. People complain fathers are hard to buy for. "I have no idea what to get him." I can help with that.

Do you know what dads want? Simple appreciation. Respect is even better still.

Noted theologian Chris Rock told how visible are the gifts that mothers give us. Kids are hungry, mom produces lasagna. Kids scrape their knee, she finds the band-aids and gives consolation. Kids want presents on Christmas or a birthday? We know where such gifts come from, Santa and the tooth fairy notwithstanding.

Then Rock continues, but how many children wake up in the morning and say, "Wow, it rained hard last night. Boy, am I ever grateful to be dry." As they brush their teeth, we don't hear them exclaim, "This running water is truly remarkable. Thanks, Dad!" Or in the middle of January, I've never once heard a child remark, "Incredible. This central heating stuff is nothing less than a miracle. I'm grateful."

Fathers wake early, board a train, and descend into the jungle to find their tribe so they can kill the woolly mammoth and drag a piece home for their own. I know we have women here who are breadwinners, but today I speak in broad strokes.

The two environments--tribal stalking and home sweet home--are very different. Sometimes when dads get home, we are not ready yet to talk about our feelings. We need a moment before we can get down on the floor to play with our children. We need to shift gears before we can start scheduling. That often gets us called remote or inaccessible...We get asked our ideas about child-rearing only to hear, "That will never work." My point is not whine about being male but to help families grasp the degree to which fathers in families can feel outside looking in. This is a key beginning point, ladies, if you truly want dad as full participant in your home.

A similar dynamic is at work in Luke's gospel today. Jesus here schools learned Pharisees on how to see through the eyes of outsiders looking in. The scene is a dinner party at Simon the Pharisee's house. Simon isn't bad. He is even well meaning, just a bit confused. He invites an interesting rabbi named Jesus into his home for supper. Pharisees were biblically astute and theologically literate. So perhaps Simon wants to discuss finer points of doctrine with Jesus, maybe some perplexing passage of Scripture, perhaps faith in light of a timely social issue. But a woman appears into this exclusively male domain of theological discussion.

Actually, not only does this woman press forward into the inner sanctum of critical debate, but the text says she is a “sinful” woman at that. She not only invites herself into this disputation of the finer points of theology, but she intrudes in a way that would have us sit up and take notice in our adult education classes.

Sometimes we speak in figurative terms about “letting down our hair”. You know, cutting loose. The truth is, as Garrison Keillor, puts it we mainline Protestants are a pretty short-haired lot, what hair we have left. Well, this woman literally lets down her hair. And she does so at a church function. It falls all over Jesus. *She kisses and washes his feet with her hair*. I can see Simon watching this and propounding his argument, “My next point is, um... What were we talking about?”

The conduct of this outsider—and a woman to boot--at a proper dinner party and formal exchange of views is more than Simon can bear. He leans over and says, loud enough for all to hear, “If this Jesus were such a prophet, he would know what kind of floozy fusses so extravagantly over him.” After all, prophets discern sin and wrongdoing, identify it as such, and confront the sinner. Does Jesus see this woman is trouble or not? If so, then why does he allow himself to be on such intimate terms with her right in front of everybody? This last question--about Jesus allowing himself to be close to the woman--takes the story to the next turn.

Jesus recalls aloud arriving at Simon’s door. He performed no hospitable act for Jesus—no water for him to wash his feet, a basic near Eastern sign of hospitality. Yet when this woman received Jesus--not into a home, but her heart of hearts--she could not do enough to reciprocate. Her gratitude is boundless and effusive. Her graciousness is extravagant, even by Near Eastern standards. Do you know the origins of that word *extravagant*? It comes from Latin and means literally; to wander outside, to exceed boundaries, to overstep limits. This woman interloper *extravagantly* showers hospitality to Jesus in her tears. She is not even the host.

Was it too much? Well, Jesus had given her a new lease on life. He offers hope where others smirked, sneered, and wrote her phone number in a bathroom stall. Having been validated deep down in her being, she is transformed. Having been liberated of the burden of her unacceptability, she only responds in kind. Flouting social conventions, her immoderate adoration of Jesus is actually in proportion to God’s forgiving love. Have we forgotten what that feels like? My God, I hope not.

We have heard this story before. Simon makes no fuss over Jesus. He often had young whippersnapper theologues into his home. He shared these theological evenings with friends and admirers almost as a rite of passage. Why, he almost *expected* Jesus to pay his respects in his home. That is, if this “Jesus” wanted anyone to take him seriously. Simon is an old hand. Because he is an insider, little surprises him. Little surprise, little appreciation--it adds up to little hospitality.

The woman, a notorious sinner, is outside looking in as a female among male theologians, and as one spurned by the devout. Finding this communion-with-

God stuff new and exciting, she lavishly welcomes Jesus. She can't do enough. How does Jesus answer Simon's dismissive rebuke? After telling the parable of the two debtors--a connect-the-dots lesson for these systematic theologians—Jesus then asks: “Do you see this woman?” It is by no means only a rhetorical or throwaway question. “Do you see this woman?” It is the heart of the matter today. Jesus can see fine, Simon. See not only in the woman's heart but also into yours.

Consider seeing and being seen. Have you ever felt *invisible*, like some dads in some families? It doesn't feel good. Or have you ever felt so *conspicuous* in a setting you could die? Not good either. If we would embrace extravagant hospitality, we might ask Jesus' question: am I seeing the other for who she truly is?

Hospitality helps the outsider feeling like a stranger to feel more like friend. How do we achieve this? We get close enough to keep her from feeling invisible. But we don't get so close and shine such a bright light to make her feel conspicuous.

The art of hospitality is a delicate gift. It is a minuet of distance and intimacy. Not too much distance. That feels chilly. But neither too much intimacy, either. That can feel cloying or suffocating or threatens in ways that outsiders aren't ready for. We see this reflected in practice we have taught around hospitality here in recent years. Do you recall how I say over and over greet first someone unknown to you before you gather with your closest friends? Guests become invisible here more readily than we insiders would imagine. This simple grassroots discipline prevents it; greet first someone unfamiliar to you. And the way we greet is important.

Don't ask, “Are you a member here?” First, in the church today, membership is becoming less important as discipleship becomes much more important. Second, that “guest” might answer, “Yes, I've been a member here for 20 years. Who are you?” Not exactly the tone we're trying for. Instead say, “Have we met before?” Not having met is perfectly permissible. Especially in a church with two services.

Also we need to be warm and sincere in welcoming, yes; but not too much. Don't ask them to chair the pledge campaign on their first Sunday! That's desperate. Don't tell them about the surgery you had last month and ask if they've ever had it. That's off-putting. Instead learn her name and one significant thing about her. And after a few minutes of chatting, introduce her to someone you know, sharing the name and she was born, say, in Peoria. Then the next person learns another thing, and introduces after a few minutes, on and on. It is called bridge-building. I am hoping we will get back into a growth mode, now back in our Meetinghouse.

“Do you see her?” Jesus asked Simon. Do you see through her eyes? Do you see her for who she is rather than who you think she should be? Perhaps Simon was vaguely aware of her, but he still didn't really see her. Not for who she was. Not for the miracle God had worked in her life. Can we learn to see in new ways?

We're all still outsiders to the place with God where we eventually hope to dwell. We're all still outsiders hungrily looking into the place where God's promises lay. Hear the good news: for outsiders like us, there is more than grace enough, abundant reconciliation, plenteous hope. Grace enough, that is, if we will share it with one another as freely as this woman poured her adoration out upon Jesus. Amen.