

June 13, 2010
Lectionary 11
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Have you ever been a guest at a really great dinner party? Just last week, I enjoyed the wonderful hospitality of a couple of friends. They invited us to their home to share a meal, and although we didn't know the other guests, any anxiety we might have experienced about spending an evening with strangers was immediately erased with the hosts' graciousness. We were offered a drink when we first entered their home, then each guest was introduced and suggestions made by the hosts of what we shared in common. Before long, the meal was served, and although great attention was given to the details of setting the table, making sure that everything was prepared just right, there was also a sense of ease and graciousness that made all the guests feel welcomed and appreciated. As the night came to a close we left having felt like honored guests, hugging goodbye to people we'd met only a few hours earlier and promising to "friend" each other on Facebook.

How different is the experience of Jesus at the dinner party we read about in today's scripture! Jesus is the honored guest at this meal, but it's the uninvited party crasher who shows hospitality. This woman comes into the party, trusting that she too deserves to be in the presence of Jesus. Touching, caressing and kissing the feet of Jesus and wiping his feet dry with her hair, she shows a radical act of love and devotion to the one who has made her whole.

Simon, the host of the meal, wonders what kind of man this Jesus is who lets this woman touch him. Doesn't he know that she is a sinner? Jesus speaks up and asks Simon, "Do you *see* this woman?" Simon apparently hadn't really seen *her*. He knew of her sin, whatever it was, but was he really able to see her and the gifts she offered in this place and at this meal? She's an outsider to be sure...an uninvited guest to this dinner party. But in the end she is the one who offers radical hospitality to Jesus.

Simon should have offered Jesus a basin and some water to wash his feet. People generally washed their own feet as a routine matter of cleanliness. Often people used oil or ointment to soothe dry, worn feet. When guests arrived in someone's home, especially after a long journey, the host would provide a basin and water for the guests to wash their own feet before the meal.

This unnamed woman who chooses to wash the feet of Jesus shows her ultimate devotion, and expresses love and gratitude to Jesus, not with words, but with actions that speak volumes. These acts of great love show hospitality in a way that Simon cannot grasp. It's not even her house, yet she is the one who surprises the guests with actions of hospitality and welcome. Through her actions and Jesus' wisdom, all who are gathered receive a surprising glimpse into the grace of God.

How can we be open to the unexpected and sometimes unwelcome guests in our midst who may turn out to be God's very presence among us?

True hospitality isn't easy. Entertaining friends in our homes may be a bit frenzied at times, and certainly there is work involved; but true hospitality—welcoming, loving, and accepting the stranger in our midst is much more difficult. In fact it's downright gutsy.

We learn early on, as children, to be wary of strangers. Much of that guardedness stays with us into adulthood, when it is expected that we don't talk with strangers on the El or while waiting in line at Jewel. Now that may not be inhospitable, but just being safe or respectful of another person's space. However, what if the "stranger" is our co-worker who's a little bit loopy, or a new neighbor in the condo building with a barking dog or noisy children, or someone with whom we disagree politically, or someone with a different skin color or language we don't understand. It's just as easy for us to be as inhospitable to these and others as Simon was to the woman who showed great love. A mirror is held up to our own sin of inhospitality when we realize that we too, like Simon, are quick to exclude and pass judgment on the strangers in our midst.

Scripture tells us to remember what it's like to be the one on the outside. "Love the stranger" it says in Deuteronomy 10, "for you were strangers in a foreign land." The reality is we have all been the stranger at one time or another in jobs, relationships, school, even in our families and churches. Each of us can relate to being the outsider, knowing the ache and hunger to be recognized and received.

And each of us has been fully welcomed into the embrace of God who forgives and loves beyond our wildest imagination. Let God's welcome for you be a source of strength and gratitude that propels you into radical acts of loving.

Maybe you won't be washing and wiping the feet of Jesus with your tears and hair, but the opportunities of radical acts of loving your neighbor, both friends and strangers, are endless. How will you respond to God's graciousness with hospitality toward the other?

Here in this place we are surprised over and over again that we are welcomed, invited, yes even encouraged to join our host at this table to share in a feast. In this meal friend and stranger stand side by side. And we may be surprised by the ones who come weeping with joy knowing that Jesus welcomes them too. God's grace and goodness enters our lives in silence and song, in the meal and in the sharing of peace, in the story of an uninvited woman woven together with our own stories. Come with your dusty feet, your doubts, your fears and your tears. Simon is not the host in this place. It is Christ and he welcomes us all to dip our hands in the cleansing waters of this font and dine with him at this table. Thanks be to God for such radical hospitality!