

Texts: 2 Samuel 11:26-12:10, 13-15; Psalm 32; Galatians 2:15-21; Luke 7:36-8:3

If Jesus came to Chadron and you invited him to your home for dinner, who else would you invite? You would want to make a good impression, right? So you would probably want the movers and shakers of this town to be there. People like the bank president, members of the city council, the superintendent of schools, the police chief. I'm not naming names, but you know who I'm talking about.

I'll bet that's the kind of gathering that was around Simon's table that night. I'll bet Simon wanted to show Jesus just who he knew. The rabbi from the town synagogue, the prosperous farmer, maybe one or two rich merchants. You know, the quality people. Folks like – well, like us, right? The ones who deserve to have a place at the table, the ones who have done well for themselves, the ones whose lives are on the right track, the ones who are from the right side of the tracks.

Or at least that's what we want people to think about us – that everything is going well, that we've got it all together. We want people to think of us like Garrison Keillor describes the folks of Lake Wobegone: The men are strong, the women are good looking and all our children are above average.

So what kind of scene must it have been when this woman shows up at Simon's house. There was a social custom in those days that needy people could come at the end of a dinner party and receive the leftovers. But this woman is breaking all sorts of social boundaries. She is down on the floor, weeping and kissing Jesus' feet. Pouring expensive oil on them. She has even uncovered her head and let down her hair to dry them off.

She is not one of the quality people. Simon knows what kind of woman she is and probably everybody else did as well. I hear those words a lot in conversation: "Everybody

knows...fill in the blank.” Gossip abounds. Rumor gets reported as fact. Who in this town gets to play that part, the part of the woman with a reputation?

Luke does not tell us this woman’s name, but he does tell us the label by which she is known around town. First name: Sinner. Last name: Woman. Sinner Woman. Can you think of some other two-word labels that get thrown around a lot in our day and age? I can: Welfare Cheat. Illegal Alien. Meth Head. Dirty Indian. Muslim Terrorist. And a few one-word labels as well: Stoner. Drunk. Faggot. Bum. Whore.

These are the kinds of folks that you would not want to come to your dinner party. You can claim that you hate the sin and love the sinner, but when you begin to name people with labels, it makes it awfully easy to miss the person that they are, or were.

And what makes Simon especially queasy is that this woman is actually touching Jesus. Pharisees were strict about keeping the laws of Moses in order to keep themselves pure. They took seriously all the rules about what kinds of foods you could eat, and how to prepare them, when during the month you could sleep with your wife, who you could touch and not touch. Impurity rubs off, you know, and when this Sinner Woman touches Jesus, what she is rubs off on him.

Let’s take a moment this morning to think a bit more about her. Even though Luke doesn’t tell us her name, I am going to give her a name. I’m going to call her Rachel. Luke does not tell us what Rachel had done that was so sinful. But I think that is intentional. By not being specific about her sin, Luke invites us to think about our own sins, especially the ones that we don’t tell anyone about. And he invites us to consider the nature of shame -- How we tell ourselves that we are not enough: not good enough, thin enough, smart enough, good-looking enough, man enough, woman enough. By not being specific, Luke

invites us to consider all the times that we have said to ourselves – if anyone knew *that* about me, they would cast me out, they wouldn't have anything to do with me.

I'll bet that each one of us has both Rachel the sinner woman and Simon the Pharisee living inside of us. I'll bet that each one of you can think of ways that you keep your secrets to yourself in shame, and ways that you have shamed other people by judging them. When Simon has the upper hand, we focus on how much better we are than other people and we judge both their actions and inactions. When Rachel has the upper hand, we turn our focus on our own shortcomings and we judge ourselves in shame.

But there's something else: I imagine that Rachel and Jesus had met before. There is nothing in Luke's story to back this up, but like everybody else in town, Jesus knows that she is a sinner. Her sins, which were many, he claims, have already been forgiven. Maybe she was one of the people who came to him for healing. Maybe he had cast demons out of her, as he did for Mary Magdalene.

So rather than scold her, Jesus offers her actions as an example to Simon of the hospitality that he has neglected. And then he says these words: "Your faith has saved you. Go in peace." And at that moment, her past becomes the past. She is no longer a no-body, because Jesus' words of life and love make her a some-body. At that moment, Simon and his dinner guests witness a transformation: all the shame and all the judgment evaporate as Jesus welcomes this woman into the kingdom of God.

I want to talk for a minute about that word "saved" – the Greek word is "*sodzho*" – and it can also mean to be healed, or to be rescued. There is an unfortunate tendency in some Christian circles to narrow down its meaning, to focus the word "saved" on some particular moment when "you gave your life to Christ." Which turns salvation into

something that you have to do. That's backward. Jesus Christ gave his life to you. Christ gave his life for you. And in giving his life, he gave you your life. In his death and resurrection, Christ found you, healed you, rescued you, forgave you. Reconciled you. Loved you.

I can imagine Jesus reaching down to help Rachel up off the floor, inviting her to stand, looking at her with a smile of recognition and with compassion in his eyes. Lifting the burden from her shoulders. His gesture is face to face and hand to hand, just like hers was when she welcomed him with her tears and her kisses.

Face to face and hand to hand. Beginning tonight, we will welcome kids from all over Chadron to our Vacation Bible School, where they will learn Bible stories and play games and make crafts and learn that Jesus loves them. This week people will come to the church for groceries and we will place bags of groceries into their arms. In a week or so we will take lunch to Closer to Home and dish up God's love for anyone who wants a home-cooked meal. Ministry does not happen at a distance. Ministry does not happen when we try to stay separate and pure. It's face to face and hand to hand.

Jesus came to Rachel the sinner woman where she was -- with words of forgiveness, healing and compassion. Jesus came to Simon the Pharisee where he was, too -- with words that were a bit more pointed, but also with complete understanding and compassion for him as well. Jesus comes to each one of us where we are -- knowing the thoughts of our own hearts, knowing where we need to be forgiven, and offering compassion and mercy.

Face to face and hand to hand. Come to the table of welcome and hold Jesus in your own hand. Touch and taste his body and blood. Let his presence rub off on you, fill you up. And whoever you are, whatever you have done, let these words wash over you today:

Your sins are forgiven. Your faith has saved you. Go in peace.