

“Welcome to the Table”**Luke 7:36-50****6/20/10-Father’s Day****All are welcome at Jesus’ table, where, in His presence, all is well.**

A woman in the city. A father’s child, stricken with the pain life can deliver to a fragile girl’s existence. Luke says it straight out—she is a sinner. Somewhere along the journey of her life she got pushed in the wrong direction, maybe overwhelmed with what seemed to her to be an insurmountable problem. And so she chose to walk down the wrong path which led her into the city. She is now part of the city, lost even to any more excuses as to how and why she ended up in such a sinful place. She is simply there, trying to live with the pain of her past and the shame of her present life.

The city. It represents for each of us something different, but all of us have a part of our lives which exists in the city—that place where things are unsettled, harsh, dirty. It’s the place where, in the towering high rises, way up and out of reach from the streets below, a lonely and empty part of our lives exists. The city is the place where, in the hollow slums, a dark sin in our lives hides in disgrace. Or there, lying on the streets amidst the flashing lights, the trauma of a painful loss in our life helplessly awaits the mercy of a passerby.

A woman in the city. In some way she represents a part of all of us.

Recently, as I was about to make my way home from a visit at a downtown hospital, I stood atop the hospital’s parking garage and gazed out over the city on a hazy, hot afternoon. I began to feel the heat of the day and wanted to leave, but God caused me to stay up there longer than I wished. I looked out into the city and watched people driving, walking, bustling to and fro. I saw tired people, and wondered where they belonged. I saw old, run-down houses and buildings, where inside someone young, someone old sits in the summer heat and also looks out into the city longing for something they cannot even name, wishing perhaps to be the woman they see driving the new expensive car because that must mean she is successful and loved by many. The woman in that new expensive car, as she passes under the broken down building, catches a glimpse of children playing in a back alley and wishes for that kind of innocence and fun in her life. One of those children, in the flash of her passing car, hears the shot of another gun being fired, another life being taken by the gang who rules the streets where they live, a gang the child will soon join because home does not exist for him. And a few years from now, that child’s mother will experience a grief only a parent who has lost a child could ever know.

As I stood on the parking garage roof, from behind me came the ring of church bells, as if amidst the heat and bustle of the city came the call from Jesus, a call to come to His table. They are the bells so many people have heard countless times before, yet from within their hurting and empty lives the bells, the call, goes unnoticed. Not for lack of desire of something new and meaningful in their lives, but because they know from where those bells sound, that within those walls there is nothing new or meaningful, or so they believe.

Yet, from a few blocks away, from behind the cloudy and cracked glass of a tired old window, the sound of the bells carried by the heat of the afternoon reaches a woman who is only beginning her day. She has spent the night on the streets, living in a world of darkness and pain unknown to most who now are bustling about the city. She has heard those bells before, but today something sounds different. Today she hears the call, Jesus' voice, telling her to come to the table. And so she responds, she must respond, and takes herself and all she has and is and goes to meet this Jesus. A woman of today's world, no different than the woman of Jesus' world we read from Luke this morning.

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. Now when Simon, the religious leader who had invited Jesus, saw this, he said to himself, "If this man, Jesus, was really a prophet, He would know who and what kind of woman this is, that she is a sinner."

But Jesus knows what Simon is thinking, and Jesus, too, speaks. He says out loud, so everyone can hear, "Simon, I have something to say to you. There was a creditor who had two debtors. One owed him 50 days' wages, the other owed him 500 days' wages. The creditor was a generous man, and when he found out that the debtors could not repay him, he forgave both their debts. Which of the debtors will love him more?"

"Well, I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt," Simon says, wondering what the point is. "You're right", says Jesus. Then Jesus looks at the woman. Of course, everyone has been looking at her all along (except one man in the corner who was startled when she first walked in and has avoided eye contact ever since). The women in the room are giving her that contemptuous 'we know what you are' look. The most righteous of the men are indignant—not only over what she is, but that she should appear so shamelessly in the company of God-fearing people. A couple of the men are still trying hard to act like they don't notice her beauty.

The woman knows they are all staring at her, and she knows what they're thinking. Strangely enough, it doesn't bother her. She's hardened herself to their contempt. But, on this day, in some way she cannot nor could not ever explain, Jesus has gotten to her. His is the only look that is neither leering nor contemptuous. There isn't a name anyone has called her that she hasn't called herself a hundred times. But Jesus doesn't call her anything, except a child of God. And so she weeps. She weeps, because today she has found acceptance, meaning, direction, forgiveness, love. For the first time in a long time, perhaps ever, she has found a place where she knows all is well with her soul. The Pharisee's table—where she is not welcome or accepted, where she is named an outcast, misfit, sinner—is transformed into Jesus' table, where she is welcome. And so she weeps. Her tired, suffering body and spirit have finally found rest.

Jesus says, "*Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.*"

I heard those church bells as I stood atop the parking garage and thought to myself, “Don’t you hear it people? That is the call of Someone Who loves you, Who can and will give you what you’re looking for in life. Slow down, there is no more need to hide within the walls of the city.” Brothers and sisters, it is time for you, for me, to come out from behind our walls. It is time for a new day.

Jesus’ words of love, hope, forgiveness are not empty words of a fantasy world which no one will ever achieve. Jesus practiced an open invitation to the table. Breaking down traditional barriers, He invites all to join Him at His table, where we can be ourselves, let down our guard, and weep from the rest we finally find in Him.

We may weep at the table before Jesus out of our pain, we may weep out of our joy, we may weep, like the woman before Jesus, simply because we have finally found rest in the power of His comforting presence. Whatever you bring to the table before Jesus, know that, regardless of what others may say about you or your situation, regardless of how you may feel about it, Jesus only says “Welcome to the table, child of God. Welcome. Because here with me, it is well.”

Today is Father’s Day, so we have named it. And regardless of how you feel about your earthly father, our Heavenly Father is pure love, ready to welcome you to freedom.

The table is set for us this morning. Today we remember and celebrate what God has done for us, given us, and invites us to embrace—His love poured out for us through His Son Jesus.

Jesus came and lived, loved, transformed lives and what this Life is all about. He offers it to everyone, to anyone who would accept.

It’s a choice, but one that leads to abundant life.

The bread Jesus said is His body, broken and given for us.

The cup is His blood, spilled that we would be made whole again.
Forgiven. Set free from sin and all that enslaves us.

Let all who believe it and accept Him join with me now as we share in communion together.

Prayer...