

Wicked Women Welcome

*A sermon by Alison Sampson on Luke 7:36-8:3
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Many years ago, both my husband and I had dealings with a particular Christian group at university. Back in the mid-eighties, when my husband was first involved, it was a group whose members sat around at lunchtime talking about faith, asking difficult questions, and wrestling with difficult answers. But it soon changed, and by the time I had arrived, eight years later, it was led by staff workers who were deeply concerned with right doctrine. In my first year of university, I was living at college and thinking a lot about faith. But as someone who asked lots of difficult questions and didn't accept most answers, I quickly became a target. I found myself in conversations I never wanted to have, in which the acceptability of women in leadership, the doctrine of evolution, questions of sexual identity, and many other issues were put under the microscope, and my position was always shown to be wrong.

In tonight's reading from Luke, Jesus is at the house of someone who considered himself to be righteous. Simon was a Pharisee, and this is mentioned not once, but three times in the opening lines of the story. First, Luke tells us that one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to dine with him; then Jesus went to the Pharisee's house; then a woman learned that he was at the Pharisee's house. Clearly, Luke wants us to understand that Jesus was at the house of someone who was devoutly religious: Someone who went to church every Sunday, so to speak, who said the right prayers, who affirmed the right doctrines, who ate the right foods, and who certainly believed that he was living the right life.

Well, when I was in first year uni, I knew I wasn't righteous. This was being brought home to me all the time. Magazines on creationism were slipped under my bedroom door at night, where I would find them lying there first thing in the morning. I would wander into the college dining room for breakfast, and be cornered by three amiable Christian blokes, who would sit one on each side of me, and one opposite me, hemming me in and then coolly proving to me how wrong I was about this or that.

Now, I am a hopeless proof-texter; I never know my Bible verses by heart. My theology is primarily shaped by relationship and experience, poetry and narrative, not rational argument. And so, again and again, I would try to participate in what I thought was a conversation, but come away feeling like I had lost an argument that I didn't even know I'd been having. And I would feel trapped, and angry, and ashamed.

For it was becoming very clear to me that I couldn't be a Christian. I just couldn't believe the right things. I couldn't accept that women should always be quiet in the church. I believed then and continue to believe now that in Christ there is no male and female, and that everyone's gifts must be exercised wherever they are called. I couldn't accept male headship of the household. I had grown up in a household headed by two parents: a highly opinionated mother, and a wise and balancing father. They had worked hard to find ways to share the decision-making, to take turns with their careers, to listen to one another, and to model a way of mutuality in their relationship. There was no way I was going back from that.

I couldn't accept that God was physically manufacturing every component of life. I was more moved by the idea that the spirit could continue to work through all creation as it gradually evolved into what we see before us now. I couldn't accept that my gay

friends were inherently sinful, nor that their orientation was a choice that they ought to renounce. And I absolutely rejected the idea that a violent God sent his only son to be tortured and murdered, solely to save me from God's vitriolic anger. I didn't want that gift, and I couldn't place my faith in a child abuser. And so, between one thing and another, it became clear to me that I was a sinner, and that Christianity was not for me. I gave up going to church, and began drinking and disgracing myself in very public ways, which was the only way I knew to extricate myself from these people. It was quite effective, and soon enough I was left alone.

Wicked women are often left alone or socially condemned. A woman who had lived a sinful life came into the Pharisee's house. As she stood behind Jesus at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them, and poured perfumed oil on them. When the Pharisee saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is—that she is a sinner." In other words, she is not even fit to touch the hem of his garment; she is not fit to be in the house.

It was really only after my brief and ugly brush with the Christian group, the group that had implied I wasn't fit to be in the house, that I began reflecting on its inconsistencies. A lady missionary preached, and the subject of her sermon was that women should not speak in church. I wondered how she understood her own position of power, her own act of speaking from the pulpit to a large congregation of women and men. I watched highly intelligent and loving women marry and submit themselves to their husbands, even when their husbands were a bit stupid, or were unfaithful or violent or addicted to porn; and I wondered how such submission and obedience related to Jesus' promises of freedom.

I had been told, "Hate the sin, love the sinner," but I began to wonder whether you really loved someone if, every time you spoke to them, all you saw was the sin. If every conversation became an argument in which you tried to convince someone their life was wrong, and if they came away feeling like hell, was that really love? And it is only now that I see the biggest irony that, having been convinced that I was a sinner for believing all the wrong things, I came to the conclusion that church was not for me.

Jesus didn't seem to mind a sinner. He turned to the Pharisee and said, "Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You did not greet me with a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfumed oil on my feet." He might have said, "When I arrived, you didn't even take my coat or shake my hand. You never showed me where the bathroom was, and you didn't even offer me a cup of tea or a glass of wine. You didn't show me even the most basic elements of hospitality, but this woman you call sinner has lavished them upon me."

By now you might be wondering how this particular sinner came back into the house, let alone ended up in the pulpit. Well, it's been a twenty-year journey, but nearly fifteen of those years have been spent here. And they have been spent here because you showed me hospitality, and you loved me first. When I arrived, I was terribly angry. I was hurting, grieving, wounded, and anxious; and I was terrified of further rejection by the church. But when we recited the words, "We come defeated, we come dancing; we come traumatised, we come trusting; we come aggrieved, we come adoring," I

heard that there was room for me and all my grief. When we prayed, "You never wait for us to become perfect before welcoming us to your table...", I heard that I could come as a sinner, and be fed nevertheless. And so, because I could come angry, and questioning, and hurting, and afraid, I stayed; and in stubbornly staying I learned that my real sins were not about doctrine, but about the many ways I fail to love. And in recognising and repenting of these very real sins, I am slowly learning to accept forgiveness, and with forgiveness comes salvation, and healing. For Jesus turned to the woman and said, "Your sins have been forgiven. Your faith has saved you. Go in peace."

I shared this part of my story with you all because, like me, many of you have been told that you don't belong in God's house. You love the wrong people, or you think the wrong thoughts, or you identify as the wrong gender, or you struggle with demons, or depression, or addiction. You ask all the wrong questions and you can't accept the answers that the righteous so confidently give.

To you I say, hear this now: Jesus didn't put much energy into calling righteous people, people who knew the correct doctrine and ate the correct food and had the correct circumcision. Instead, he sought out everyone else: Tax collectors and traitors, people who were plagued by demons or disease, people who belonged to other tribes and other cultural groups, oppressors, military men, wicked women. "I have come to call not those who think they are righteous, but those who know they are sinners," he said; and he did this through eating and drinking with them, and telling stories; he offered bread and forgiveness.

So every one of you belongs here, just as you are, right now. Every one of you is being saved by your determination to enter the house, despite the risk of rejection; every one of you is being healed by your determination to participate in the hospitality that extends from God's table to us all.

And I want to thank you for the ways you model this: Thank you for the bread, and thank you for the forgiveness. It was because of this congregation's hospitality to a wounded and angry sinner that I stayed; and it has been because of the staying that I have been formed as a Christian and as a pastor. It has been deeply healing to be part of this great project of learning to love across boundaries; and it has been deeply healing to be part of this great project of learning to love God, and myself.

In a few weeks, I will move to a new city and a new great project, with a different group of people who have felt or who have even been told that there is no place for them in the church. We hope to form a new congregation in which "whosoever will may come," where we will practice loving across boundaries, without judgement, placing hospitality before doctrine every time.

For I believe that this is the way of the gospel: When we offer hospitality to, and accept hospitality from, anyone who comes into the house—every sinner, wretch and reprobate, every wicked woman like me—then we will encounter Christ; in encountering Christ, we will experience forgiveness; and in forgiveness, we will know God's deep and abiding healing. Ω