

Meeting Jesus at the Table: Surprised by Grace
Luke 7:36-50

Most of the time, we experience interruptions as annoying. One minute you are speaking about something important, and then you get interrupted, and then you forget what you were talking about. Interruptions can also be difficult when you are trying to get something done or trying to leave. They are hard to deal with when we are traveling. But sometimes, interruptions can be very helpful to shift our perspectives.

A few years ago, SNL had a skit about a Thanksgiving dinner where family conflict was escalating, but a welcome interruption saved the day. Even though the family had many disagreements about politics, they were united by their love for Adele's music. Let's watch the skit:

<https://youtu.be/e2zyjbH9zzA>.

Even though this was meant for comedy, I think it speaks to a deeper truth. Sometimes interruptions become doorways to deeper connections to God's grace. When we lose our sense of God's grace in our lives and in our relationships, interruptions come as beacons from a different realm of being, which help us to see ourselves and others through God's grace.

Our Bible story is about such an interruption. We meet Jesus this week at the table of a Pharisee named Simon. This was a respectable sort of table with respectable sorts of men. Women must have been there, but only in the background to cook and to serve. But the element of surprise came when a woman interrupted the dinner and anointed Jesus' feet in public.

Let's listen to the story according to Luke 7:36-50:

36 One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and took his place at the table. 37 And a woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. 38 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. 39 Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him—that she is a sinner." 40 Jesus spoke up and said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." "Teacher," he replied, "speak." 41 "A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. 42 When they could not pay, he canceled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?" 43 Simon answered, "I suppose the one for whom he

canceled the greater debt.” And Jesus said to him, “You have judged rightly.” 44 Then turning toward the woman, he said to Simon, “Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. 45 You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. 46 You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. 47 Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.” 48 Then he said to her, “Your sins are forgiven.” 49 But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, “Who is this who even forgives sins?” 50 And he said to the woman, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.”

The interruption by the woman added several dimensions of grace to this meal. First, Simon got the chance to expand his understanding of Jesus and of God’s grace. Most likely, Simon invited Jesus to his home as part of what he normally did for rising rabbis. This was business as usual. We tend to think negatively of the Pharisees, but they were highly religious people and highly attentive to doing the right thing. They believed that it was important to keep the laws of God, to follow the rules of faith, and to maintain their purity. According to biblical scholars, Jesus turned the purity system, with its "sharp social boundaries," on its head. In its place, he substituted a radically alternate social vision. The new community that Jesus announced would be characterized by interior compassion for everyone, not external compliance to a purity code, by egalitarian inclusivity rather than by hierarchical exclusivity, and by inward transformation rather than outward ritual. In place of "be holy, for I am holy" (Leviticus 19:2), says Marcus Borg, Jesus deliberately substituted the call to "be merciful, just as your Father is merciful" (Luke 6:36). It is not their lack of faith that is presented as the problem of the Pharisees; it is often their lack of compassion. By being strict about following the rules of faith, they sacrificed their ability to be flexible and to allow for mistakes and imperfections. They also created social hierarchies defining who is good and who is sinful. The religious leaders among the Pharisees considered Jesus and his followers as ritually unclean sinners who flaunted God's clear laws. But somehow, Jesus and the Pharisees kept in close contact with each other. Even though they disagreed, they did not give up on each other.

And so, this man Simon had invited Jesus to dinner at his house. I am sure everything was done according to tradition and religious rules. But the perfect evening was interrupted by a woman who was considered a sinner (most likely, just like Jesus was labeled as well). She burst onto the scene and began displaying affection for Jesus in a way that must have made everyone in the room very uncomfortable. A woman's place was in the kitchen and not sitting where the men were. Washing Jesus’ feet with her tears and hair was a major violation of public decency and appropriate behavior for women at that time. But the woman did not hold anything back. This became a test for

how Jesus would react to what seemed to be very inappropriate behavior. To the shock and dismay of his host, Jesus lifted up the woman as an example of hospitality and love. She became the example of faith, while the host, who was supposed to be the one with the high social status, became the example of lack of grace and hospitality. This was the pattern of Jesus' attitude. He saw people through God's grace and not through the social judgments and hierarchies of the world. The Gospel of Luke is very intentional about telling how Jesus included women in his circle of followers. This is the reversal of the kingdom of God according to Jesus. It turns the norms of society upside down for the sake of love and grace.

The second dimension of grace in this story is for the woman herself. Cynthia Campbell and Christine Coy Fohr write this about the woman, "She came with her alabaster jar of ointment, but maybe she simply planned to anoint his (Jesus') feet in an effort to shock these religious leaders. A kind of civil disobedience against these haughty, judgmental elites. Whatever her intention for that night, something about seeing Jesus interrupted her plans, and like a guilt-ridden child upon seeing a loving parent, she just cried. And cried. And cried. No words needed. Something in the comfort of his presence made her know she was forgiven - whatever her sin. And what better response to such grace than tears?"

Sometimes interruptions to our plans are the only ways God's grace gets through to us. As Campbell and Fohr put it, "Maybe we need to ask ourselves how we respond to such interruptions? To such grace? As we continue our journey through the season of Lent, may we be open to the interruptions that might meet us along the way. May we take them as opportunities for growth and learning. May we shake off the Simon inside us, who would rather mumble disapprovingly. And instead, may we take those interruptions for what they are: opportunities. Opportunities for growth, opportunities for love, opportunities for grace. Grace so overwhelming it needs no words. Grace so amazing it brings us to tears."

We are going to end with a children's book called, What Do You Do with a Chance? By Kobi Yamada: <https://youtu.be/kvyXPTGP2U8>. Amen.