Scandalous behavior: Luke 7:36–8:3

by Michael L. Lindvall in the June 1, 2004 issue

Each of the four Gospels tells about the woman who anoints Jesus while he is at table, and in each Gospel someone sharply rebukes her for her action. But Luke is unique: unlike event as told the other three Gospels, the act of anointing as told in Luke does not portend Jesus' death. Instead, hospitality and table fellowship are the recurrent themes, and they are a clue to the meaning of this parable. The woman in Luke enacts radical (and offensive) hospitality even as she crashes the party. She incarnates an extravagantly gracious (and scandalous) welcome as she washes Jesus' feet with her tears, dries them with her hair, kisses them with her lips and finally anoints them with oil.

Luke identifies her as "a woman of the city" and "a sinner." These two comments, along with the sensuousness of her actions, have led to speculation that she was a prostitute. Such conjecture is not impossible, but it is only conjecture, even though it has encouraged the church's historic conflation of this woman and Mary Magdalene, who is mentioned at the end of this Gospel reading ("from whom seven demons had gone out"). The identification of Mary Magdalene as a prostitute is also unwarranted.

There are three characters in the tale: Simon the Pharisee and host of the party, this unnamed woman who crashes Simon's pleasant soirée, and Jesus, the guest. In reading the story, one first notices the contrast in the ways Jesus and Simon treat the woman. Simon is immediately judgmental; Jesus is gracious. There may indeed be a sermon here.

Yet Luke's interest in hospitality, plus the parabolic riddle embedded in the story that Jesus tells Simon, suggests that we should look for another contrast: the startling difference in how Simon and the woman treat Jesus. Simon is the very caricature of respectable religiosity, a Pharisee who is doubtless good and honest, as well as curious and open-minded enough to invite Jesus to dinner. The woman is, well, *a woman*, and a "woman of the city" at that. She is "a sinner" in everybody's estimation, finally even that of Jesus. And she's forward, uninvited and outrageous, breaking all the rules about how women and men are to relate to each other in this time and place. Yet it is this woman, and not Simon the host, who offers Jesus the

ironically appropriate hospitality. Simon is parsimonious and guarded. He does not know how to welcome Jesus into his home. In the end, Simon the rebuker is rebuked, while the rebuked woman is named the perfect hostess and is forgiven her sins even though she seems never to have confessed them, at least not in words.

I imagine Simon not as some stereotypical hypocrite, but as a man much like many religious seekers I have encountered. He is bright and curious and interested in religious ideas. (Why else invite a traveling rabbi to dinner?) I imagine him sitting at the table with Jesus, his arms crossed as he leans away from his half-finished dinner, inquiring eloquently about Jesus' views on this or that intriguing spiritual question. I imagine him eager to engage Jesus as a conversation partner.

How pleasant, after all, to host this young rabbi of note who offers another interesting spiritual perspective in the wild diversity of first-century Judaism. Simon didn't need Jesus as Messiah or Savior; he was just interested in what he'd say. Thus his hospitality, such as it is, is really all about Simon and Simon's spiritual interests. Our society, indeed our churches and our seminaries, are populated with more than a few Simons, interested and interesting spiritual dilettantes for whom Jesus is mostly, well, *interesting*.

The woman, in contrast, offers Jesus a hospitality that is all about Jesus. It is oriented toward him, not her. There is no theological dinner talk, only her act of utter, off-putting, self-yielding devotion. She needs Jesus not to round out her personal spirituality but so she can become whole, the human being she was created to be.

A few years ago I introduced a new element into the weddings at which I officiate. Several weeks before the ceremony I ask the couple to write each other love letters. Write privately, I tell them. Don't show the letter to anyone, not even to each other. Just seal it in an envelope and give it to me. And then I ask them if I can select excerpts from their letters to read as a part of the wedding sermon. Invariably the letters are quite moving. When I read from them everybody in the family has a good wedding cry, and some break down and sob.

A couple of attractive and bright graduate students wrote a pair of especially unforgettable letters. When I read one of the letters, it was not just the family members who cried but also the cellist, a stranger hired for the occasion, and I, the pastor.

It was the groom’s letter that did it. He wrote about how his wife-to-be loved him. Not knowing that he was penning Lukan theology as well as declaring love, he said that his fiancée’s love was most amazing because she loved him as he was, imperfections, male foibles and all. That was amazing enough, he wrote, but even more wondrous was the fact that her unconditional love had this way of pulling him to grow to be more worthy of it.

Her love did this without ever implying that he wasn’t worthy of it. Her unquestioning love took him as he was, but somehow nudged him to be a better man without ever saying that there was anything wrong with him. Maybe that’s why the entire congregation—including the couple, the family, the cellist and me—were in tears.