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“Faith @ the Movies – Babette’s Feast”

Luke 7.36-50

Philip Yancy, in his book “What’s So Amazing About Grace?” tells the story of a Chicago Social Worker who was working with prostitutes. A young woman was talking with the Social Worker, telling the reasons she became involved in prostitution and what it was like – the money, the lifestyle, the near-impossibility of walking away, the living with a permanent sense of shame and guilt. She even told the Social Worker about hiring out her own daughter.

The case worker wrote: “I could hardly bear hearing her sordid story...I had no idea what to say to this woman. I asked if she ever thought about going to a church for help. I will never forget the look of pure shock that crossed her face. ‘Church,’ she cried. ‘Why would I go there? I already feel terrible about myself. They’d just make me feel worse.’”

Wow!

And yet, Philip Yancy reflects, “Men and women, much like this prostitute fled TOWARD Jesus, not away from Him. The worse a person felt about herself or himself, the more likely they were to see Jesus as a refuge.” And then Yancy asks, “Has the church lost that gift?”¹

Today’s Bible story is a great example of what Yancy is talking about. Picture this story with me. Jesus had been invited to dine in the home of Simon the Pharisee.

You might remember Pharisees received a fair bit of ‘bad press’ in the Bible. They are presented as legalistic, judgmental and self-

righteous...or, to use Mark Twain's phrase, 'good people in the very worst sense of the word.'

Jesus, in this story, is eating with a Pharisee and his friends, a very good, very religious men.

The dinner was served in an open area, clearly visible from the street. Servants of the host customarily poured cool water over the guests' feet as the event began. It was a common social ritual. Simon had not done it, however, at least for Jesus.

So, in the middle of the meal, a woman walks in from the street – "a sinner," the Bible says. What kind of "sinner" she is, is suggested by what happens next. She's carrying a flask of perfume, which she breaks and pours over his feet. Then she lets down her hair – a gesture of intimacy – and dries his feet and kisses them.

Imagine you are a guest at the table. How comfortable are you at this stage?

Simon, the host, is appalled. 'If Jesus knew what kind of woman this is – who she really was – he wouldn't be allowing her to touch him,' he says in a stage whisper audible to every one who is there.

Luke goes to great lengths to show how scandalous the contact between Jesus and this woman really is. Luke paints her actions toward Jesus in the most sensitive, sensual colors. She is a woman who has invaded the Men's Bible Study. She has let down her hair. She has touched Jesus. And Jesus has allowed the touching. Come on, really, is this any way for a real prophet to be behaving?

Jesus can see these good religious men are shocked by what's going on.

So Jesus tells them a story about two debtors, one who owed a large amount of money, the other a small amount. The creditor

forgave both. No questions asked. “Which will love the creditor more?” Jesus asked. “Why,” Simon responds, “The one who was forgiven the most.” And so Jesus says, “Her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love.”

Some times when we read the Bible like a big rule book with a bunch of do’s and don’ts, we miss seeing what Jesus actually DOES.

And here, in this story, as in so many other stories about his life, what Jesus did was to embody a radical and simple graciousness, an acceptance and love that paid no attention to the rigid moral standards of the culture and religion of his day.

He embodied a radical grace that reached out to all people ...
EVERY ONE.

He loved every one the same, it seemed: Simon, the respectable Pharisee, and the prostitute off the street. NO ONE HAD EVER SEEN ANYTHING QUITE LIKE THIS BEFORE!

He got a reputation – “the friend of sinners” they called him and they didn’t mean it in a positive way. Wouldn’t it be wonderful and faithful if this church was so extravagant and radical in its grace that it earned and deserved the same reputation? ²

Grace...unconditional love...is so contrary to common sense. The common sense of the world we live in tells us that everything must be paid for, that there is no such thing as a free lunch, that we are constantly being evaluated and judged by God.

I was watching Sports Center yesterday morning (my favorite show) and the Sportscasters were discussing the incident of the Oregon Duck football player punching the Boise State player and being suspended for the season.

The sportscasters all agreed that the Oregon coach made a mistake allowing this player to stay with the team, keep his scholarship, practice and go to classes. They thought he should be kicked out. They should be done with him. Lee Corso, a famous sportscaster, even said this decision will ruin the Oregon coach. It doesn't make sense, he said, to keep him around.

Grace is contrary to common sense.

I was moved when I saw the Oregon coach in tears say, "Yes, he made a terrible, terrible mistake. But this player needs us. I love this player."

I only pray this young man is open to receive and be transformed by the gift he has been given...the gift many believe he doesn't deserve...not the gift of a football scholarship but the gift of love...the gift of grace. Grace is contrary to common sense.

The last movie in our series Faith@TheMovies, *Babette's Feast*, is a wonderful story of Grace. It is a beautiful film centered around two sisters in the late 1800s, whose father was the founder of a strict religious community on the stark, desolate coast of Denmark. They live a rough, rule-bound, difficult life. Their daily diet consists of boiled cod fish and dry bread.

They heard sermons on Grace every single Sunday and then spent the rest of their week trying to earn God's favor.

One dark and stormy night, years after the founder of this community has died, a distressed stranger, Babette, appears knocking on the sisters' door after having fled from the French Revolution. They let her in and employ her as their cook and servant in exchange for room and board.

Babette accepts the security and simple life they offer and works for them for 14 years.

This small little religious community is plagued by old resentments and disagreements and guilt from past actions. They are judgmental and intolerant of one another. All those years of faithful living and striving to do what they felt was right before God did not seem to be enough. The sisters were in despair and didn't know what to do.

One day Babette got word that she came into a small fortune, 10,000 francs. The sisters assumed Babette would soon leave them and return to France.

At the same time the sisters and the community were looking forward to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the birth of the founder of the congregation, the sisters' father.

Babette asks permission to cook a banquet and pay for it herself – an extravagant feast beyond their wildest imagination – the best wine, the best food, the best desserts, simply because Babette wants to give it.

Grace came to this community in the form of a feast, a meal-of-a-lifetime lavished on those who had in no way earned it, who weren't even sure how to receive it. Grace came to them as it always comes – free of charge, no strings attached.

In the presence of this grace, old wounds between members of this congregation begin to be healed, old conflicts reconciled, slights and insults forgiven.

When Babette's feast is done, the guests depart, and we are taken to the kitchen to see a weary and worn Babette alongside stacks of dirty dishes.

The sisters come in and offer a modest “Thank You” for the meal knowing that Babette would soon leave them now that she is 10,000 francs richer, save whatever the meal cost her. That’s when Babette drops the bombshell. She is not leaving. There is no money left. She spent EVERY LAST PENNY on the meal!

She spent every last penny preparing this feast of Grace. She had given them EVERYTHING! Babette’s feast...a gift from the heart that cost everything to the giver and nothing to the receiver. It doesn’t make sense really to spend your last dime preparing a feast for a bunch of stubborn old ingrates. Grace is contrary to common sense.

At the end of the meal, one of the small group, a retired General says: “...the moment comes when our eyes are opened, and we see and realize that Grace is infinite! Grace demands nothing from us but that we receive it, and acknowledge it in gratitude...” that we might extend that same Grace to others.

This feast is set before us as a gift...to remind us of the gift of God’s extravagant Grace revealed in Jesus...to remind us we are loved unconditionally.

As we taste the goodness of grace, may it transform our lives and our community in such a way to live this radical grace that we might earn and deserve the reputation as the “friend of sinners.”

¹ Philip Yancy, *What’s So Amazing About Grace?* (Grand Rapids:Zondervan, 1997) p.11

² John Buhanan, “The great Reversal,” Sermon preached at the Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago, June 17, 2001