

## **“Dinner Theater”**

### **Luke 7:36-50**

Preached by Dr. Robert F. Browning, Pastor  
Smoke Rise Baptist Church, Stone Mountain, Georgia

June 24, 2007

Howard Douglass Wolfe is credited with being the “Father of Dinner Theater.” An entrepreneur from Virginia, Wolfe created a Barn Dinner Theater franchise in the 1960’s that included twenty-seven theaters in seven states. The Barn Dinner Theater in Greensboro, North Carolina that he founded in 1962 is the oldest and longest running dinner theater in America.

The first dinner theater I attended was a production of “Godspell.” I’ve attended many since and enjoy talking with the cast, who usually serves the meal prior to the play. Many cast members are aspiring young actresses and actors that are hoping to make it on Broadway.

It appears that Jesus and other guests were a part of a dinner theater when they dined in Simon’s home. It was unplanned but quite dramatic. While Simon and his guests were eating, an uninvited woman entered the area where they were and anointed the feet of Jesus with perfume. Evidently she was overcome with emotion and began crying, wetting Jesus’ feet with her tears. Out of profound humility and respect for Jesus, this woman wiped his feet with her hair and kissed them. As you would expect, this led to an unscripted dialogue between Jesus and his host about the purpose of religion and the role of the clergy. Let’s look at this dinner drama to see what we can learn.

**Why did Simon invite Jesus to dinner?** After all, Simon was a Pharisee and most Pharisees were threatened by Jesus and felt uncomfortable around him. He challenged their beliefs and did not follow many of their religious rules.

Perhaps Simon was curious and wanted to know more about Jesus. What did he believe? Where did he get his authority to teach and lead? Why did he not conform to their traditions? Was he an imposter? A little table talk just might provide some answers for Simon.

**Why did Jesus accept Simon’s invitation?** Surely he knew that he would be on the hot seat that evening. I’m sure he did; however, Jesus went wherever he was invited for the purpose of building bridges of understanding and goodwill. Luke recorded other times that Jesus ate with “tax collectors and sinners,” like Levi and Zacchaeus. Accepting Simon’s invitation was not that unusual for him. He seemed quite comfortable “sitting in the house of an enemy welcoming the tender touch of a penitent sinner.”

**What do we know about the woman that interrupted the dinner and anointed Jesus with perfume?** Very little. We don’t even know her name; however, it appeared that others did because she struggled with a bad reputation. Some speculate that this woman was Mary Magdalene, a presumed prostitute. Most scholars don’t agree and there is really no way to know. All we know is that she had a soiled reputation in that community and was familiar with rejection and pain.

Her humility and gratitude that evening leave us with the impression that she had a previous encounter with Jesus and unlike many encounters, it was good. He was kind to her, treated her with respect, forgave her sins, restored her self-esteem and gave her hope for a better life. No wonder she anointed Jesus with perfume. He had done more for her than anyone and she had to let him know it.

**What was Simon’s reaction to this woman and Jesus?** He was greatly disturbed that Jesus allowed this woman to touch him, let alone show such extravagant devotion. He found it hard to believe that Jesus did not rebuke and scold her, which confirmed, as far as he was concerned, that Jesus was not a holy man. “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” Luke 7:39.

This tells me a lot about how Simon viewed religion and religious leaders. Evidently he expected Jesus to put this woman in her place and do it quickly. Any self-respecting prophet would do this! Or would they?

Theologian and Episcopal priest Tom Ehrich writes, “Simon tried to fit Jesus into his expectations, thought-world and control. He wanted to define what a prophet properly does. He wanted to impose that definition onto Jesus and subject Jesus’ authority to his control.”

Is this still being done? Sure it is, Ehrich believes, by ambitious, power-hungry believers that define faith, God and interpret the Bible in order to control others. They oppress humanity in the name of revealed truth, when in reality it is their narrowly defined definition of truth.

“I am hopeful,” Ehrich continues, “that thoughtful Christians can learn the core of God’s will by not using Scriptures to justify hatred or claims to power, but using Scripture, science, human history, philosophy and other approaches to God as a rich tapestry that reveals God and commends a way of serving, living, loving and sacrificing that are grounded in what Jesus did and will make us agents of goodness in a troubled world.” I am, too.

**Why didn’t Jesus meet Simon’s expectations and rebuke this intruder?** Clearly, this woman made everyone uncomfortable. Why was Jesus willing to put his reputation on the line by being kind to her? I believe the answer gets to the core of who Jesus was. Others’ needs were more important than his ego or approval ratings. Jesus cared more about this woman than what others thought about him, and caring for her meant healing her wounds, giving her hope, accepting her unique expression of gratitude and sending her on her way in peace, not shame.

“We assign people to hell that have spent their whole lives trying to climb out,” write Gulley and Mulholland in their book, [If God is Love](#). Jesus would not let this happen to this woman or anyone else he met. Neither should we.

Be careful, though. This kind of bold compassion can get you in trouble when it rubs up against others’ expectations of you. Be prepared to pay a price when you befriend those that others have given up on or consider unworthy, and one thing you may have to sacrifice is your religion.

Mike Slaughter, pastor of the Ginghamburg Church in Tipp City, Ohio says that before you can see what God is doing and experience His love, you’ve got to get rid of your religion. “Religious people don’t see people,” he writes. “They see causes, behaviors, stereotypes and institutions. They put people in categories, many of which are unfavorable and unacceptable.”

This story supports Slaughter’s thesis, doesn’t it? In Simon’s eyes, this woman had no right to be at this table. Now he did, but she did not.

**Who doesn’t belong at your table?** Is it the poor, addicts, the uneducated, the sick, the abused, the depressed or those that are different? Religion can cause us to be exclusive, insensitive and cruel. It can blind us to our own humanity and need for grace. It can make rules more important than relationships and this is wrong. For Jesus, faith was about people, not doctrine, and helping others, not condemning them.

Jesus tried to help Simon understand this and melt his cold heart when he asked Simon if he saw this woman. What a question. How could he not see her? She was the focus of everyone’s attention. It appears, though, in Simon’s religious world he could not see a woman climbing out of hell that needed encouragement but a sinner that needed to be condemned and avoided.

The very opposite was true of Jesus. This woman belonged in any circle of which he was a part because relationships were more important to him than religion or rules. He revealed this when he told her in front of Simon and all his guests that her sins were forgiven, her faith had saved her and she could depart in peace, not shame. This had to be as reassuring to her as it was disturbing to Simon and his guests. Simon tried to crush her spirit but Jesus would not allow it to happen. Don’t worry about your past or your accusers, Jesus told her. Get on with your new life.

**Who do you know that needs affirming, reassuring and encouraging?** Who has spent their whole life climbing out of hell only to be pushed back in by those that cannot see their own sins and need for forgiveness? Who needs you to see their potential and offer a helping hand? I hope you will be the presence of Christ in their life this week and reach out to them. So does Jesus.