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**SUNDAY:** Ordinary 11

**SERMON: Social Graces**

Text(s): Galatians 2:15-21; Luke 7:36 - 8:3

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When our children were very young, there was a series of books by the author Richard Scarry that were very popular with the 2-5 year-old set. The characters in many of them were animals, and one of the main characters was a blue worm named Lowly— Lowly Worm. One of those books, which I remember reading about a million times, was called the “Please and Thank-you” book. In it, Lowly Worm and his friends (and we hoped, our own daughters) learned the social graces of saying “please,” and “thank you.” Such practices make relationships with other people work more smoothly, don’t they? Sometimes, the social graces differ from culture to culture, and what is considered polite social behavior in one culture may give offense or be misunderstood in another. In Malaysia, we learned that among the Chinese, it’s not only polite, but actually flattering to refer to an older woman as “Old Auntie.” Try that here, and you might get slapped or at least get a really dirty look.

Learning social graces are important in because we are social beings. It’s impossible for us to exist for long apart from the company of other human beings. To be fully human is to be in relationship.

And yet, in our culture, we have somehow come up with the really bizarre situation where we idealize the notion of being alone. How many of you, when you were growing up, shared a bedroom with brothers or sisters, or even with your parents? Now think of the situation today, particularly in suburban homes built within the last thirty years. Would a family with three children even consider buying a house that had only one or two bedrooms? Hardly, unless that’s all they can afford. These days, particularly in suburban settings, children not only have their own individual rooms, but often their own

bathrooms, TV’s, computers, stereos, and now, of course, cellphones. Each family member keeps his or her own schedule of meals, many times pre-packaged foods that can be nuked in the microwave. Some of us value life in Maine just because it’s not like that. . .yet, but it’s slowly making its way here too. But does all this individual cocooning take the place of relationships? Hardly! Instead of face-to-face interaction with family and neighbors, there’s the virtual neighborhood of the Internet, where web sites like MySpace and YouTube and online chat rooms and blogs testify to our insatiable need for relationships.

Social graces have deeper implications than simply being the oil that makes the machinery of everyday relationships run more smoothly and with less clatter. They’re the way we stay connected to other people, which means staying connected to our own humanity. They are the way we recognize the value of other human beings. And that means recognizing the value of human beings who are not just replicas of ourselves.

Our notions of justice, of civil or human rights, are really just the logical extension of those everyday social graces that we teach our children and grandchildren. The very concept of the rule of law as opposed to anarchy or banditry is really a social grace, isn’t it? It’s why we write constitutions and by-laws, why we insist on the right to vote for those who will lead us and resist tyranny or dictatorship imposed by force or violence. Social graces are the means of achieving a civil and humane society.

Both of our lessons today, in very different ways, make this point. St. Paul understood the gospel news of Jesus’ resurrection as a radical, transformative social grace. In the face of the religious tribalism or ethno-centrism that he confronted within his own religious community, he argued for a radical inclusivism that went beyond the borders of both Jewish religious and cultural identity and beyond the borders of the rigidly stratified and patriarchal Hellenistic society of his day. Many of his fellow

followers of Jesus did not grasp this fully, including, apparently, even Jesus' own brother James. They insisted that Gentiles who were drawn to the Jesus movement had to first become Jews, accepting circumcision and obeying the Law of Moses

Paul vehemently argued that the death of Jesus exposed the spiritual and moral bankruptcy of allowing ethnic identity or religious tradition or social class to divide human beings. Conversely, for him, the resurrection of Jesus was God's way of affirming that a new world order was breaking into the old and overturning it. It's now possible, he claims, for humanity to move to a new neighborhood, a new social address, where relationships are no longer based on the familiar categories of race, of culture, of gender, or socio-economic class, but instead are characterized by acceptance, equality, and above all, by genuine love. To make this move to this new social address, we must have the same radical trust in God, the same willingness to risk everything, even life itself, that Jesus had. We live, says Paul, "*by the faith of the Son of God, who loved us, and gave himself for us.*" Radical trust in God, which is what Paul means by faith, is the key that unlocks the door to this new home for humanity, where, "*there is no longer Jew or Gentile, male or female, slave or free, but all are one in Christ.*"

The author of the Gospel of Luke makes the same point in his powerful story of the social outcast who crashes a dinner party that Jesus is attending. Jesus appears to have attracted, not only opposition from some quarters of his own religious tradition, but some support, or at least, a respectful hearing from others. Simon, whom our text identifies as a member of the sect of the Pharisees, one of the most devout and respected of Jewish sects, invites Jesus to a dinner at his house. He's not really a fan of Jesus, or he probably would have been more attentive to the social graces demanded of a good host. But as the story makes clear, he apparently omitted some

of those common courtesies that were more or less expected of hosts— water to wash the dust of the road off the guests' feet, perfumed oil to slick down one's hair and probably make the body odor a little less objectionable at the table. Right Guard or Secret hadn't apparently been invented yet. Simon is probably fairly skeptical, but somewhat intrigued by Jesus, so he's at least willing to take the chance of having him for dinner and giving Jesus a polite, if not particularly warm, hearing.

The fact that a woman intrudes on the dinner is not in itself extraordinary. Often the houses were more or less open in design, and at the homes of the wealthy it was fairly common for those less fortunate to show up around mealtime and often get a charitable handout from the host.

But it's who the woman is that provides the drama in the story. She's described as "*a woman of the city, who was a sinner.*" Now that could mean that she was a Gentile, since within the thinking of most Jews of Paul's day, Gentiles were all simply lumped together under the category of sinners. We heard that phrase from Paul in our epistle lesson— Gentile sinners. It was an a tautology or an oxymoron. (It reminds me of the time I was defending my dissertation, and one of my professors on the dissertation committee, with whom I enjoyed a pretty close relationship, was a Presbyterian. At one point, he took issue with my description of something as an oxymoron. Knowing I was a Methodist at the time, he couldn't resist getting in a little joke at my expense, "An example of a real oxymoron," he said, "would be a Methodist theologian.")

But if the woman were a Gentile sinner, she probably wouldn't have even been allowed to set foot in the house, because she would have spiritually defiled it. The servants would have chased her away before she got across the threshold.

More likely here, she was either a known adultress or a prostitute, both of which also

merited the description of “sinner.” She was a pariah, an outcast. Her very presence in polite company was a scandal to every righteous (or self-righteous) woman and man. She has absolutely no social graces; in the eyes of everyone at that dinner, except for Jesus, she had, as the euphemism puts it, a “social disease.”

Simon, the host, good pious man that he is, is deeply offended when this woman makes her way to where Jesus is reclining at the table, as the custom was in those days, and begins to anoint his feet with perfumed ointment and to weep and wipe her tears from his feet with her hair. *“If this man were a prophet, he’d know what sort of woman this is who is touching him—that she’s a sinner.”*

So Jesus tells Simon a simple little story. And like many of Jesus’ stories, it’s more like a bear-trap. I’m guessing, from the story, that Simon was probably a banker. Once upon a time, Jesus begins, there was a certain creditor who was owed money by two debtors. One owed him a huge amount of money, but the other owed him only a small sum. Both of them ran into some financial difficulties and defaulted on their loans. The creditor, however, was a really humane sort, a real good guy, and he simply forgave both debtors their outstanding balance. Cancelled the debt. Now, which of them, do you think would love the creditor more, the one who was forgiven a great debt or the one who was forgiven a small debt?

Ooh! Simon has nowhere to put his foot except square in the bear-trap, does he? He’s no fool. He could see this one coming from the moment Jesus opened his mouth, but there’s no way to avoid answering the question, and there’s only one possible answer to the question. There’s no wiggle room, no room for equivocation or extenuating circumstances. Only one answer. And as soon as he gives it, the trap is sprung, and he knows it. Almost, not quite, but almost makes you feel sorry for him, doesn’t it? Like shooting fish in a barrel. It’s almost too

easy.

*“You’re right, Simon,”* Jesus says. *“Now do you see this woman?”* Isn’t that the real question? Do you see this woman? No, of course Simon hasn’t seen her— not really seen her as a human being of value or worth. He’s seen her as a prostitute, a sinner, a worthless person, but he hasn’t really seen *her*. Nor, as Jesus drives home the point, has he really seen himself for the arrogant, self-righteous sinner that he is. Nor has he seen that he’s related to her by virtue of the fact that both he and she have been forgiven their debts by their mutual and gracious Creditor. What a horrible thought for Simon to have to contemplate— that he and this “woman of the city who is a sinner,” are in the same boat, the human boat, both the recipients of divine charity, divine mercy, divine grace, because both of them are defaulters on God’s loan of life.

Deep inside we know this, don’t we? This is not some extraordinary revelation. We even tacitly acknowledge that we’re all in the same boat, all connected by our common humanity when we see someone less fortunate than ourselves and say, “There but for the grace of God, go I.” And when we say that, even sometimes when we say it in a self-congratulatory way, we’re speaking nothing less than the gospel truth. There, but for the grace of God, go all of us. Which is why St. Paul understood that nothing we bring to the table counts for anything— why all that we can do is come with empty hands and a deep trust, a deep faith, like Jesus’ faith, in God’s graciousness.

And that’s why we must learn new social graces. And the chief one is to really see other people as people, and to see ourselves in relationship to them, whether we want to be or not. If we really see them, we will not be able to hate them or stand by while they suffer social ostracism or injustice or violence. We cannot cocoon ourselves into some private spirituality that leaves others out of the equation. John Wesley, the 18<sup>th</sup> century English reformer, said,

“I know of no such thing as solitary Christianity. All holiness is social holiness.” And hardly anyone put that truth into action better than Wesley. His own heart-warming experience of recognizing the wideness of God’s mercy and grace sent him on an extraordinary mission of social grace that transformed the very face of 18<sup>th</sup> century England and, in the judgment of many historians, saved England from the bloody revolution that tore France apart just across the Channel. Wesley’s tireless work in prison reform, forming credit unions to provide micro-credit for poor people to start cottage industries, his campaigns against slavery and child labor, work with alcoholics,— all of these things and more were the social graces that sprang from Wesley’s own personal experience of the grace of God.

Who is it within the circle of people around you are you failing to see? Who have you isolated yourself from? What individuals or groups do we as a congregation see or fail to see? That’s really the question our Vision Task Force was wrestling with. When we talk about what programs we should be offering, or what space needs we have, or what kind of facilities we need, we’re really talking about who we’re seeing and what needs they have that we can collectively help to meet. What will it mean for us as a church to really begin to see those who are around us? Who must we include within the reach of our love and acts of caring? What issues of justice must we address? What services of divine compassion must we render to our fellow debtors? Our answers to such questions will testify to our faith, and determine to what extent we experience the reality of God’s kingdom, which is to say, the fullness of our own humanity.