

Being Too Good for Your Own Good

Being too good. That sounds like an oxymoron doesn't it. It seems like a strange concept. It doesn't sound at first like it would be a possibility...we just aren't likely to encounter someone too good. I mean how can one be too good? I remember being told several times by my mother that I was "too smart for my own good." I no longer remember what I had done to call forth that comment but I do remember wondering how one could be too smart---because wasn't being smart something desirable---something that everyone wanted to be. I think that same type of logic applies to the title I have chosen. We generally think that there is never too much of a good thing. After all, being good is desirable, something we are encouraged to be from our earliest memories. So how can you be too good? By the time we finish looking at this story from Luke's gospel we may have some ideas about the pitfalls which might be present when we think of ourselves as "being good."

Since this passage appears in the church lectionary every three years, I have heard many reflections on this story. In this story we have three characters: Jesus, the invited guest; the Pharisee who issued the invitation to his home; and the uninvited guest who came and disrupted the occasion. In most, if not all of the reflections, the emphasis has been on the unnamed sinful woman and Jesus' generous forgiveness of her many sins. Not that that is an unimportant facet of the story---the gracious extending of mercy to the very sinful. But I would like to take a look at the third major character in this story---the Pharisee named Simon whose dinner party was interrupted. To understand how disruptive this guest's appearance was, let's enter the scene and meet the characters and look at their expectations for the evening. Jesus has been creating quite a stir in the neighborhood. He has been teaching the multitudes in the surrounding countryside. He has healed the servant of the centurion in Capernaum and then has gone to Nain where he has restored to life the widow's son. People are beginning to take notice of who he is and what he is doing---he is gaining a reputation. Some are naming him a prophet. Now the Pharisees were important people in the local community---leaders in the synagogue, trained in the scriptures. They considered themselves representatives of God and keepers of the Torah---God's Law. They were very concerned with religious purity---and considered themselves "good", if not "very good." They followed the law to the letter and were very fastidious about their virtue. So someone gaining a reputation as a prophet being in their neighborhood would have attracted their attention. So Jesus receives an invitation to come and share table fellowship with this Pharisee. At the end of the story that we find other guests are also present but they do not speak until the end. When Jesus arrives, we are told that he takes his place at the table. According to the customs of the time the Pharisee and his guests would have been gathered in a room where their meal would have been served at a low table. They would have been half reclining upon sofas and propped on their left sides while taking food from several dishes provided using their right hands. During the meal, there would be expected discussions about important political and religious concerns of the community. As also would have been the custom, this would have been an all male guest list. It would have been expected that as the individual guests arrived, a servant would have washed their feet as a sign of the host's hospitality. They would have been provided some scented ointment for their hair. On this occasion suddenly, the Pharisee and his guests are interrupted and this interruption challenges all the expected details of the gathering. Into this all male occasion a

woman dares to enter: a woman who is not a servant of the Pharisee coming to bring food to the table which might have been unexpected, but not disruptive. No, this unnamed woman who enters is a woman from the city who it seems also has a reputation. She is known to the Pharisee, and probably his guests, as a sinner. Because she has heard that Jesus will be there she comes, bringing with her an alabaster jar of ointment. She comes into this respectful house thus staining its purity. In the Pharisee's eyes she is now adding to whatever other transgressions have given her that reputation as a sinner. She has entered, uninvited where women are not allowed. She enters with a display of public weeping, her hair unbound and uncovered are violations of custom. As if that weren't enough, she approaches Jesus, and going behind him to his feet proceeds to bathe his feet with her tears, dry them with her hair and then anoint them with the ointment from her jar while kissing them. If invading the all male gathering was bad, then these additional actions are sure indications of her sinner status. This interruption and display were just too much for the Pharisee. Verse 39: "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.'" With this thought the Pharisee is judging Jesus and concluding he could not possibly be a prophet. He knows he would not have allowed such behavior so he is also judging himself as not a sinner. The Pharisees' conclusion is that a prophet of God would not associate with sinners as it would make him impure. Jesus takes this opportunity to respond to the Pharisee's thoughts; but not by addressing them directly, at least not at first. As so often was the case with Jesus he used a parable to make his point. He uses a story about two men who owed debts to another to speak about forgiveness and gratitude. One man owed the creditor a large debt; the other owed a smaller amount. As it happened, neither man could repay his debt, so this owner of the debt forgave them both. After telling the Pharisee this story, Jesus then questions the Pharisee, "Now which of them will love him more?" The question actually asks about the degree of love, but assumes that both those forgiven their debts will respond with love. The Pharisee's answer seems somewhat grudging in tone to me, as if he knows he is being led somewhere he doesn't want to go. Yet his legalistic training compels him to reply, "I suppose the one for whom he cancelled the greater debt." Jesus gives Simon the Pharisee credit for his correct answer to the question: "You have judged rightly." But before Simon can pat himself on the back too enthusiastically, Jesus takes it out of the hypothetical situation and back to the situation at hand where the Pharisee's treatment of Jesus had been lacking in respect. He reminds Simon about the failures in courtesy shown when he arrived at Simon's home—no servant to wash his feet, no kiss of greeting, no ointment or oil for his head. Considering this lack of respect for Jesus as a guest, we might wonder why the Pharisee invited Jesus into his home in the first place. Did he hope to gain something from this man who was healing illness? Was it perhaps with the motive of testing Jesus so he could declare he was not a prophet? Jesus contrasts Simon's behavior toward himself to that of the woman whose actions have so offended the Pharisee. In this context, the Pharisee is judged as the one whose sins have not been "many" like the one owing the lesser debt. His sins may be lesser than those of this woman, but because he is depending upon his lack of sins for his relationship with God, he does not see he needs God as much as the woman does. Verse 47&48: "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." This is not to say that sinning more is a good thing, but if we feel "good"

about ourselves, like the Pharisee, perhaps we forget our need for God. The basis of the Pharisee's judgment upon the sinful woman and Jesus' actions was his dependence upon ritual purity—the keeping of the Law and all the ordinances and regulations in a legalistic manner. That dependence upon his own ability to keep those laws led him to consider himself “not a sinner”. He judged the woman and looked upon her, not with love or compassion, but as one who should be excluded. At the end of the passage, Jesus speaks to the woman, saying, “Your sins are forgiven. Your faith has saved you, go in peace.” Simon is not recorded as saying anything else. Those other guests at the table now begin to speak as they question who this could be who could forgive sins. We are not told whether Simon realizes that he too is a sinner, or that Jesus is not only a prophet but more. We don't know if Simon learned that he needed a relationship with God, not just boxes to check off. The unnamed woman and Simon the Pharisee depart the stage and Jesus continues on proclaiming the nearness of God's kingdom as he journeys to Jerusalem and the cross. Jesus continues offering forgiveness for sins—offering love and compassion—proclaiming the nearness of God's kingdom. That is the gospel message—that God makes the offer of forgiveness because of God's love and compassion, not because of any boxes that we may be able to list and check off. The love of God is offered to the Pharisee when Jesus came to dine with him. Of course, he expected it and probably figured he was worthy of it. And the love of God was offered to the woman of the city. She didn't expect it, and she doubtless figured she wasn't worthy of it. It is important for us to remember that the Gospel always comes to us in three sure steps. The first step is God's step. God comes toward us with a love so scandalously deep, a welcome so unimaginably wide that you can't move yourself beyond it. That Pharisee's well-tuned righteousness did not disqualify him. Jesus came to dine with him. Whatever was in that woman's past did not disqualify her. And not matter what we done or not done, it doesn't disqualify us either. Nothing can place us beyond the love of God for us. The second step is our response to God's offer of love and forgiveness. All we have to do is to admit that we actually need the One who is beyond us. All we have to do is to admit as the woman did and the Pharisee could not that we are not radically autonomous, disconnected islands of self sufficient isolation. When we imagine that we are so good, or so smart, or so whatever, we like that good Pharisee, wall God out. When we imagine that we don't need any strength but our own or any wisdom but our smarts, when we fancy we don't really need to love or be loved, we effectively keep God at bay. But when we own the fact of our need, then God can work in us and on us and gently day-by-day make us more and more into the men and women we were always meant to be. That's the third step of the gospel—God working away at us. The most amazing thing is the love that God extends both to the worthy and the unworthy. This unconditional love which we often call grace has the wondrous property that it pulls us toward being better people just by its existence in our lives. In the eyes of the Pharisee, and sometimes our eyes, the sinner is the one who is not obedient to all of God's laws as we understand them. Sometimes it is helpful for us to realize that in God's eyes we are all beloved and our forgiveness depends not upon our own actions but upon the amazing grace God extends. Thanks be to God for that steadfast love. Amen.