

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“Living in Ordinary Time: Being Inappropriately Appropriate”
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Psalm 5:1-6, Luke 7:36-49

Inappropriate behavior. Those are the only two words that seem to fit this entire story. From beginning to end everyone in here is completely inappropriate. But to make my point let's take a quick inventory of all of the inappropriate behavior. First there is the woman who comes to Jesus. Jesus is at supper with the local religious elite. They are probably having some deep theological discussions when this unnamed woman wanders in, stands behind Jesus and begins to weep. Then she bends down, opens a jar of costly ointment and anoints his feet. Not satisfied with that she sheds her tears onto his feet and then dries them with her hair. This is about as inappropriate as one can be. First she enters the male dominion of the dinner. Then she touches Jesus (a really big no-no) and finally lets down her hair to wipe his feet. While this might not seem a big deal to us, the only women in the Roman world who let their hair down were, how shall I put this, women whose reputations and business were not socially acceptable. She was totally inappropriate. But she is not the only one.

The second person to be inappropriate is Jesus. Yes, that's right, Jesus is inappropriate. And he is inappropriate in two unbelievable ways. The first way Jesus is inappropriate is that he lets this woman do what she does. Jesus could have stopped her. He could have and should have castigated her and sent her packing. That would have been the appropriate response. It would have been so because everyone in First Century Judaism understood the rules which governed male-female relationships in public. First there was no physical contact. There were no public displays of affection even between husband and wife. There were certainly no public displays of physical contact between non-related individuals. Second Jesus was a rabbi. Rabbis especially were to not only have no contact with women, they were not even to speak with them, or acknowledge their presence. Finally, Jesus knew what kind of woman this was. She was, as Luke puts it, a sinner; a woman with a reputation. Jesus' willingness to allow her to touch him was socially and religiously inappropriate behavior.

Second, Jesus is inappropriate when he forgives her. So often I think we focus on the woman's inappropriate behavior and fail to notice that the Pharisees get as upset about Jesus act of forgiving as they do about what the woman is up to. The Pharisees, and as a reminder, were a religious political party that tried to live holy lives guided by the 613 commandments, or mitzvot of the Law of Moses. As such, they believed that only God could forgive. And when God forgave, it was through the rites and rituals of the Temple in Jerusalem; meaning that forgiveness was to be found not in the words of some wandering rabbi. Forgiveness was not and could not be offered by just anyone. If this woman wanted forgiveness there were means by which it could be achieved. She could gather up the requisite sacrifices and head to Jerusalem and find the forgiveness of God there. We can sense this when those around the table asked, “Who is this that forgives sins?” The fact then that Jesus tells her that she is forgiven is the most inappropriate action that takes place at this table.

Inappropriate behavior. A story filled with inappropriate behavior...or is it? On the surface that is all that this story is about, yet somehow Jesus manages to take all of this inappropriate behavior and make it appropriate. The woman's behavior, Jesus explains to his dinner guests, is completely expected because she is showing the deep gratitude she has for being forgiven. Evidently this woman and Jesus had met some time previously and in an act of compassion for her Jesus had forgiven her. Overwhelmed by that gift, by that love, her love for Jesus drives her to show her gratitude. This is the heart of Jesus' short story about the cancellation of the debt. Her forgiveness was great and so then was her response. Jesus' inappropriate action of allowing her to carry out her work of thanksgiving is allowed by Jesus because it is an act of hospitality, something that Jesus' Pharisee host Simon, had failed to offer (which by the way is one more inappropriate aspect of this story). Why, Jesus asks should he stop this woman from doing what Simon ought to have done. Finally, the act of forgiveness for Jesus has never been tied only to life and work of the Temple. Drawing on the great prophetic tradition Jesus understands that forgiveness comes through a changed life that reflects the love and grace of God; something which this woman has demonstrated with her actions...thus forgiveness is warranted. In a sense Jesus offers us a vision of inappropriately appropriate behavior.

Being inappropriately appropriate is what the church and all of us in her are called upon to be. I say that because it is what allows us to truly offer the love and grace of God to the world. Let me explain. As human beings, we build walls between what is appropriate and inappropriate behavior. We do so in all sorts of ways; in terms of social interactions, manners and cultural taboos. What we fail to realize is that many of those walls are merely social constructs that have no basis other than the traditions of our elders. The problem with those walls is that they divide people. They separate people one from another, allowing certain people in and walling others out. Those who are inside receive all of the benefits society has to offer. Those on the outside are left out and their lives are diminished.

It would be nice to think that the church was different. But it wasn't. In fact, the church has been one of the primary places where the walls separating appropriate and inappropriate exist. There are inconsequential walls; how we are to dress for church, whether or not we are to applaud, or whether we sing from hymnals or screens. These are the obvious walls. But there are also the not so obvious walls; those walls that essentially declare certain people to be inappropriate to be within the community of faith. Those walls have excluded people of color (just look at the slave balconies in older Southern churches), people within the LGBT community and persons with disabilities. While the church would say that God loves everyone, we would make it clear that certain people's presence was simply inappropriate. And so it is only by being inappropriately appropriate that we can break down the walls that keep some people out and thereby invite everyone in to know the great love that God has for them in Jesus Christ.

This past week I began my eighth year with you. And one of the things I value the most about being your pastor is your willingness to be inappropriately appropriate. Once upon a time it was inappropriate for women to be in leadership in this church, whether as elders or ministers. Then the church decided to be inappropriately appropriate and change that. Once upon a time children were not

welcome in worship, except to sing as a choir. Then the church decided to be inappropriately appropriate and make children an integral part of worship. Once upon a time, persons with disabilities were not fully welcomed into the church. But then the church decided to be inappropriately appropriate and created Celebration station, then an inclusion program and then call the first pastor in our denomination dedicated to the inclusion of persons with disabilities. Once upon a time, members of the LGBT community were essentially excluded from our community. But then the church decided to be inappropriately appropriate, and tear down the wall of separation and welcome all persons regardless of sexual orientation into the membership and leadership within the church. What this means is that we are a church that is constantly asking ourselves, how do we bring down the walls that keep people from knowing the full love and grace of God in Jesus Christ? How do we follow the example of Jesus in that evening meal when he broke down the walls to invite in an unnamed woman into the love and grace of God?

The challenge for us then is to not assume that we have broken down all of the inappropriately/appropriate walls that keep people away from God's love. It is to continue asking ourselves what barriers still need to be broken...and then break them. So this week, my challenge to you is this, to ask yourselves, how am I being inappropriately appropriate in helping all people know that they are loved and cherished by God.