

Commentary on the Gospel for Thu, Sep 18th 2014

Ken Bailey, a Christian evangelist and scripture scholar, lived for some time among the peasants in the hill country of Iraq and Syria in villages so remote that their customs and culture had scarcely changed over the 2000 years since Jesus' time. Bailey wanted to learn how these villagers would have reacted to the gospel stories of Jesus' interactions with the villagers of Galilee. Here's what he learned about today's gospel.

Jesus and some of His disciples came into the village as itinerant teachers, telling those able to listen about God's kingdom and the importance of His listeners' changing their priorities. He would have reassured them that God's forgiveness was offered and was theirs to accept (see John 20:21–23). The demands of Arab hospitality were so strong that the village's leading citizen would have felt obliged to host Jesus at a meal (if for no other reason than to preserve his reputation in the village). It is clear that he did so begrudgingly as he both failed in his duty to wash a traveler's feet and challenged Jesus' status by criticizing his lack of discernment of character. Bailey's villagers were appalled at such unthinkable behavior.

Villages then and now were open affairs. The house at which the dinner took place was open to the whole village and though not everyone was invited, they all might come and listen to the conversations. Diners reclined on benches around an open atrium, leaning on their left sides and eating with their right hand from what was offered. Servants with bowls of water and towels would have washed the dirt from the diner's feet, hanging, as they were, over the far end of the bench. One of the villagers, the woman designated as a "sinner", had obviously been very moved by Jesus' preaching that day and when she walked around behind the diners she was dismayed at the host's failure to have seen to the washing of Jesus' feet. Such a breach of hospitality was a disgrace, not just for the host, but for the entire village. Further, it was a dreadful insult to this wonderful man who had brought her (and the entire village) such good news. She burst into tears and thereby washed Jesus' feet. Next, she broke all cultural taboos (then and now) for a woman in such societies. Letting down her hair to serve in lieu of a towel would have brought a shocked gasp from those present. But no human norms – nothing – could stop her from making up for the host's discourtesy.

That's the scenario we need to appreciate as we attempt to grasp Jesus' message in today's gospel.

Jesus tells His host that the woman had been forgiven – forgiven much, in fact – and that her loving reaction to the host's discourtesies to Jesus was the result – not the condition – of that forgiveness. We have to get the sequence right: forgiveness first, then loving service. Her response was not so much to Jesus, as to the host's abominable behavior. Her response was for Jesus because she accepted what He had told the village that day about God's forgiveness. She didn't wash Jesus' feet to gain that forgiveness, for she realized it had already been given.

If we really understood that we have been forgiven, would we let anything stand in the way of our serving those in need? Perhaps we don't realize we've been forgiven much.

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