Jesus was not the only guest that the Pharisee had invited over for dinner that night. Apparently there were others at the table (see v.49) who were as offended as their host by the gracious response Jesus gave the unwelcome guest, the woman who showed up without an invitation and made such a scene that, well, we’re still talking about it, aren’t we?

It’s not clear why the Pharisee asked Jesus to eat a meal with him. Maybe he was genuinely interested in getting to know Jesus better. Maybe he really wanted to talk theology and learn more about his gospel of the kingdom of God (after all, the Pharisees were a pretty thoughtful group who took being God’s people quite seriously). Or it could well be that this was one of those traps that Jesus’ opponents kept trying to set for him, an opportunity to discredit this popular and dangerous street preacher. Maybe that’s why the Pharisee had invited some of his friends -- to take notes, to see if he bothered to wash his hands (there were rumors that he didn’t), to be witnesses to any heresies that Jesus might utter.

As it turned out, by the end of the evening they had plenty to chew on and plenty to report to the purity police at the Temple. And that was because something they had not expected had happened -- or more precisely, someone they had not anticipated had crashed their private dinner party. She was the kind of woman you weren’t supposed to talk about in polite company, but the kind that probably provoked murmurs and whispers and her own set of rumors. It would be unthinkable to be seen in her company. The Pharisee does not describe the specific reasons why she was not held in high regard; he simply dismisses her as a “sinner.” It was as plain as day. And in turn he dismisses Jesus as any sort of legitimate prophet for apparently not being able to recognize something so obvious for himself.

But if it’s unclear why Jesus had been invited over in the first place, it’s abundantly clear why this sinful woman showed up. She was there because she knew Jesus was there. And she knew that Jesus did not see her the way the Pharisee and his friends saw her. She knew that somehow this street preacher saw her with compassion and not judgment or ridicule; that he saw her, as God had intended her and created her to be. She sensed that Jesus saw her with love and believed in her best self rather than whoever else she might be on her worst day. This uninvited guest showed up because she understood that God in Jesus had invited her to begin again and live a new life. She was there, not for dinner, but because she was starving for hope and a new lease on life and knew deep in her bones that Jesus was both of those things. She was there because there was nowhere else for her to be that mattered this much.

At the same time, I think she is not there to be forgiven, or to earn her forgiveness. I know Jesus says at the end of the story, “Your sins are forgiven … your faith has saved you; go in peace.” But I think he’s simply stating the truth for all to hear that she already knew, the truth that had set her free and led her to barge through the door of the Pharisee’s house to begin with. And so I believe we should read her outpouring of love towards Jesus as just that: love. Lavish love that is a response to her salvation and not a requirement for her salvation. Maybe somewhere earlier she had heard him preach his gospel about God accepting and forgiving and transforming us into shining, courageous people. Maybe she had seen him heal a leper or violate all the purity codes by getting close to and loving other women and men who nobody was supposed to get close to. Maybe she had been standing in the shadows or on the edge of a crowd when, as Luke says, other women had been healed in ways that no one had thought possible. Who knows:
when Mary Magdalene was set free from her demons, perhaps this woman had felt whatever chains were binding her drop off, too. And so now she was simply saying thank you and praising God in the best way she knew how.

If the Pharisee was surprised and offended by her presence, we should not be. As writers like Philip Yancey have pointed out, the grateful woman in this gospel story is exactly the kind of person who shows up whenever Jesus shows up. Or to borrow from one of the energizers from the Montreat Youth Conference, whenever “JC’s in the house,” he’s not going to be there by himself: all kinds of broken, hurting, and overlooked people are going to find their way there too. Jesus is like a magnet for the marginalized -- and so much so, that if you only see crowds of the well and the well-to-do at worship, you kind of have to wonder who it is they are worshiping. Or let me be blunt: any church that wants to call itself a church but doesn’t have the visible poor in or around it does not have Jesus at the center of its life. Because while Jesus is happy to respond to anyone’s dinner invitation, he might as well give a general warning to whoever is doing the welcoming: set enough places for a bunch of folks you had no intention of inviting. Set enough places for all the men and women and young people and old who have long been excluded from the table, but who have so much to teach the rest of us about relying on God’s grace and unconditional love. The kingdom of God is big enough for all of us, but Jesus takes a special joy in welcoming those who have not been invited guests at most of the parties this world knows how to throw.

Now having said that, let me also say that I know it’s not easy to see all of our neighbors through the eyes of grace, the eyes of God. I’ve had some less than gracious thoughts lately about guests on the church basketball court who may be pretty good at putting a ball in the basket but can’t seem to hit the broad side of a trashcan with their Taco Bell wrappers and Powerade bottles. Who invited you to come and mess up our green little corner of Green Acres?

And then I remember a few years back, when we were kicking around the idea of letting Cave participants use our basement youth rooms. And there was a lot of dissent and resistance to that idea -- mostly from some of our youth who saw that space as their own and didn’t want a bunch of strangers and outsiders getting an open invitation to make themselves at home.

And yet, maybe we should have seen that need and the presence of these “outsiders” as a sign of hope, a sign that Jesus really is at work in our house, doing what he always does, sowing the seeds of shalom and a beloved community that we could not have dreamed up on our own. It happened long ago when that young, Jewish movement of Jesus followers had to figure out what to do with all those uninvited Gentile guests who were elbowing their way to the table. It will continue to happen in all sorts of new ways, with the church constantly being reminded that we can never fashion a future based on demographics that fully make sense to us. All we can ever do is invite Jesus into our midst and then brace ourselves for the wild rush of diversity that surely will follow.

Oh, and by the way, at this last Montreat youth conference, two of our participants this year were young people who first came to Covenant through the Cave. And I can’t begin to tell you how much they both enriched our common life this year. They were living proof that the living Christ can take all of us uninvited guests and turn us into the joyful family of God. May God’s name be praised. Amen.