

The Pharisee's Dinner

You don't belong here. That had to be going through Simon the Pharisee's head when this woman entered his dining room.

It's not completely clear why the Pharisee invited Jesus to his dinner. At this point, the Pharisees have not exactly been praised by Jesus. But based on Simon's musings as the scene played out, it seems he had some questions about Jesus. Was he a prophet as some were saying?

But if he was truly a prophet, he should know that this woman doesn't belong there. If Jesus was a proper prophet, Simon assumes he would have tossed her out...or at least stopped this embarrassing display.

You don't belong here. How many people have heard that over the centuries – in society...and sadly, even in the church.

There are a variety of reasons people might decide someone doesn't belong in a particular place, but the reasons all have one thing in common – they have in some way judged the person as inferior and unworthy compared to those who are accepted.

I use long airline flights to catch up on movies. On our way back from Norway I watched the 2013 movie 42. It's the Jackie Robinson story. His jersey number was 42, hence the name of the movie. Jackie Robinson was the first Black baseball player in Major League Baseball. He was recruited by Branch Rickey, the owner of the Brooklyn Dodgers, in 1947 specifically to integrate Major League Baseball. The movie portrays the intense racism that Robinson faced and how he overcame it.

There is one particularly awful scene in which the manager of the Philadelphia Phillies screams the n word and other racial epithets throughout the game. He and others on the team repeatedly scream "you don't belong here!" and "Go back to the Jungle!"

Although the Phillies manager was the most vocal and most unrepentant, that sentiment was broadly expressed wherever the Dodgers played – you don't belong here.

I wish I'd seen the movie before any of the times we've dealt with Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, or this year the Sermon on the Plain. The scene at the Dodgers Phillies game provided a stunning glimpse into the power of Jesus' command to turn the other cheek and how it works to stop evil.

Branch Rickey, a devout Methodist, explicitly encouraged Robinson with those words of Jesus...with turn the other cheek. With Rickey's fierce encouragement, Robinson steadfastly refused to fight back, even when pitchers repeatedly hit him with the ball.

The scene with the Phillies is a very hard scene to watch. But it was a turning point for Robinson's Brooklyn Dodgers teammates. They could see the evil of racism for what it was. Their hearts began to change and most of them gradually came around to embracing Jackie Robinson as a teammate. And in the years to come, Black players would become as much a part of the game as white.

You don't belong here. It seems that a mark of the darker side of humanity is the desire to decide who belongs and who doesn't.

Obviously there are times when that's legit. I legitimately don't belong on any kind of pro sports team...even as like a ball chaser.

But often the reasons for saying someone doesn't belong are just based in judgment, discrimination, and even cruelty. Maybe some of you've been told – or at least made to feel you don't belong somewhere. All of us have probably experienced at least a little bit of that not belonging somewhere along the line.

But it would seem that a hallmark of Jesus' work does the opposite - Jesus repeatedly draws in those who the world says don't belong.

Let's look a little closer at this woman. There's an awful lot we don't know about her. She is described as a sinner. For whatever reason, when women in scripture are described as sinners, the assumption is sexual sin – especially prostitution. But the story doesn't say that.

With hundreds of laws Jews were expected to follow, it could have been a number of things. Maybe she made a living by fleecing people or by stealing. Maybe she killed someone. While the nature of her sin isn't terribly important for the purpose of this story, it is important for how woman from the Bible are remembered in the church.

The last part of today's reading lists some of the woman who were disciples of Jesus...who followed him and provided for the ministry. Mary Magdalene is one of them.

Mary Magdalene has also often been portrayed by many as a prostitute. How that evolved is a convoluted story that arose out of the early church. But in this reading today – chapter 8 verse 2 is the only thing scripture ever says about her life before she became a follower of Jesus. She was healed of seven demons. That's it. There's no evidence she was a prostitute. And for the record, Jesus shared meals with prostitutes too.

But Mary was a victim of the early church authorities' belief that women didn't belong in positions of leadership.

But whenever people decide someone doesn't belong, Jesus proves us wrong every single time.

The stories of two ancient women and one 20th Century ballplayer all have something in common – through the work of Jesus – or his followers - people go from not-belonging to belonging.

Jesus forgives the woman at the Pharisee's dinner. We don't know any particulars about the woman's experience with Jesus prior to this scene. Whatever it was, it gave her the courage to show up in a way that probably made the other guests pretty uncomfortable.

This woman likely knew that the people in that room believed she didn't belong there. But her faith told her otherwise. In spite of what she had to know about the others in the room, faith told her that Jesus could make her worthy of a place in that room.

It's not even completely clear whether forgiveness happened before this incident or at the moment Jesus said your sins are forgiven. If it was before, then her anointing is a lavish response to the lavish grace of Jesus.

If it wasn't, then her coming to Jesus is a recognition for her immense need for grace...grace that she trusts that she will receive. Perhaps it's ambiguous on purpose. The grace of Jesus Christ is there for the grasping – and the appropriate response is lavish love. And at the same time, lavish repentance brings lavish grace.

Either way, the forgiveness and grace Jesus grants the woman bring her not only to belong...but maybe to even belong more than the Pharisee at his own dinner! She has shone where his hard-heartedness has been revealed.

The second woman, Mary Magdalene, is freed from the power of seven demons – demons which likely made her also unwelcome in the righteous spaces of first century Judaism. Jesus not only heals her, he makes her a vital part of his community of disciples. In fact, the story tells us that Mary, Joanna, and Suzanna were all brought into the community of disciples through healing.

Two thousand years later, the teachings of Jesus shaped a baseball team manager and brought a talented Black baseball player into a community that would one day place him in the hall of fame. His story would change the course of baseball history – and American history - forever.

Jesus' ministry of healing, teaching, forgiving, and casting out demons does more than solve the specific problem.

Jesus takes people from "You don't belong here" to "Welcome." And it makes communities better because they benefit from the abilities and contributions people who were once excluded might make.

Jesus is in the business of building a new world...a world in which the love of God reigns. If you have doubts about your belonging, Jesus says you are welcomed and loved in this realm of God. If you have doubts about someone else's belonging, he has the same words for them.

And together with Jesus, we can build a kingdom where the gifts and contributions of all can be celebrated.