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East Liberty Presbyterian Church
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Luke 7:36-8:3; 1 Kings 21:1-21a
“The Other Half”

From the mid-1980’s to the mid-1990s, Robin Leach offered us tours of some of the most dramatic, opulent celebrity homes in from the comfort of our own living room couches. The host of television’s “Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous,” Leach sent us away each evening with “Champagne wishes and caviar dreams.” His show was a rare opportunity for most of us to catch a glimpse of how the “other half” lives – those whose lives know luxury that surpasses even the plenty of our own most comfortable days. Whether we had much or had little, this show was sure to show us something that took our breath away. Sure, “Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous” gave way to “MTV Cribs,” but we can’t help but sneak a peek inside these celebrity homes from time to time, to give our imaginations a rest and see for ourselves how the other half lives.

Today’s biblical stories provide an opportunity for us to do just that. In each of our texts for this morning, we enter into the palaces and homes of some of Israel’s rich and famous and get a bird’s eye view of the inner workings of their households. Our Old Testament lesson takes us into the home of King Ahab and his wife, Queen Jezebel. The King has a relentless desire to own the vineyard of Naboth, whose land borders his own. King Ahab tries everything to secure this land, but to no avail. Naboth resists the King’s offer to purchase the land at value, outright refusing to sell. See, for Naboth it was important to obey the LORD’s command that he and his family should

remain as steward over the land given by God. The land was God’s, his only to care for. It was not Naboth’s land to buy nor to sell, and so he makes the choice to remain faithful to God. And so we read that his resistance to the King results in his murder – planned by the queen and executed by the king.

Fast forward to our New Testament text – a much more familiar story for many of us. This story takes us inside the home of Simon the Pharisee where Jesus is an invited guest for dinner. The text tells us that Jesus was *reclining* at the table – language that one commentator points out reflects the Roman style of dining together rather than the traditional Jewish mealtime practice. Simon was not only a powerful Jewish leader, but he was a wealthy man, whose own lifestyle was reflecting some of the wealth of the occupying Roman culture. And yet we see that for as much wealth and power as he has, he falls short as a host – failing to wash Jesus’ feet or anoint his head. Simon’s shortcomings are magnified by the relentless affection showered upon Jesus by the unnamed, sinful woman, who bursts into Simon’s dinner party – this woman who kisses Jesus’ feet and anoints his feet with her tears and wipes them clean with her hair.

In both of these stories, we read about those who have much, but who are *missing something*. Somehow, in spite of all of their worldly advantages, these insider views show us that Ahab, Jezebel, and Simon *just don’t “get it.”* They have missed the point about what really matters – about the source of riches that are unequaled by worldly power. They have missed the point that there is a well of unquantifiable wealth – the love of a living and forgiving God – calling us, forgiving us, offering new life.

We read how those deemed “other” by worldly standards – a humble Jezreelite and a sinful, unnamed woman – know what matters. Their expressions of faithfulness win our hearts and boast of divine reward. They are set up for us as an example of righteous living. They are held before us as role models who, even in the face of adversity or even with a past that weighs them down, lean on the mercy of a God who knows them and a God who loves them.

When we read these narratives – particularly when we read them side by side – it is easy for us to “get it.” The text so clearly shows us whose behaviors are favorable and whose leave something to be desired. It is easy for us to cast our vote, to take the side of the ones whose choices are pleasing to God. These stories are parables after all. They read like Biblical fables, that teach us the right way and the wrong way to live as God’s people. It’s crystal clear: We are *not* to sell our divine inheritance for worldly gain. We are not to break God’s law to get what we want. We are not to hurt another or murder another, to take what’s not rightfully ours. On the **flip side**, we **are to be faithful to God’s command**. We are to be **repentant**; we are to live as humble **servants** of our living God.

But as tidily as these texts divide the players and divide *us* into camps, this picking of sides might just be a problematic approach in the first place. We might jump to conclusions that **God’s preference for the *behavior* of the faithful may lead us to believe that God does not care about the faithless**. We might comfortably call “other” those who first dismissed the “other” in their midst, who looked down upon the poor, the woman, the obedient and the sinful, and tried to classify such folks as not worthy of the same human dignity they expected

for themselves. We may forget that God sent Elijah to King Ahab, trying to call him to turn toward God; and we may forget that Jesus had graciously accepted a dinner invitation so that he might share a meal in Simon’s home.

When we so comfortably pick sides, join camps, we may wind up on a slippery slope headed in a direction in which we might even feel that we have permission to draw some of these lines and to determine *ourselves* who is in and who is out. **We may forget that any classification of “other” immediately sets the *other* outside the realm of “us.”**

We might struggle to engage in dialogue with those of different theological perspectives at Presbytery meetings and forget that we are all members of the Body of Christ. We may welcome those who are GLBT into our circle of friends and our congregational life, but we may fall short of advocating for full inclusion because their issues are not our own. We may ignore the continued need to advocate for salary parity and between men and women in the workplace if our household income is not affected by such economic injustice. We may turn a blind eye to institutionalized racism in districts where not all schools are created equal because this problem won’t affect *our* kids. We may outright refuse to work with members of an opposing political party in our joint quest for economic revitalization because of an unwillingness to cross party lines. We may budget to care for the needs of our family, but can’t find enough to help meet the needs of the poor in our midst. If a problem doesn’t affect *us*, we are less likely to address the problem. If the needed change won’t impact our lives, we’re less likely to work toward that change.

We must be challenged to expand our understanding of “us” even when the broadened definition is uncomfortable. We are called to examine the lines we draw in our daily lives; to face the reality of who we call “us” and who we call “them.” And then we are called to go to the next step – to ask if we are honoring the full humanity of all of God’s children, to ask if we are responding to God’s call to love.

Now I don’t mean to claim that in our acceptance of the full humanity of others we must accept all behavior. Clearly, not all behavior is acceptable. We are not invited to enable harmful behaviors. Embedded in these lectionary texts is a clear emphasis that *how we live matters*. How we treat each other matters. How we care for others, matters. There is a call to enacted justice, to radical hospitality, to considering the needs of others even if our wants command our attention. There is a call to **embody faithfulness** – through acts of obedience; through acts of repentance; through acts of humble service to God and to our neighbor.

Jesus makes room at the table for everyone – for Simon and for the tearful woman. We are invited to make some more room in our lives so that all may know this radical, hospitable love of Jesus and be strengthened in that love to reach out in love for others. Let’s start here, with the help of a God whose love just will not let us go. Let us start here, with the support and encouragement of one another, our family of faith. Let us start now. Amen.