

June 13, 2010
 Church of the Good Shepherd
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 Luke 7:36-8:1

“For John the Baptist has come, eating no bread and drinking no wine and you say, he has a demon, and the Son of Man has come, eating and drinking, and you say, Look! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!”

The people of Jesus’ generation were impossible to reach. God sent them prophets and they didn’t recognize them. They were suspicious of John the Baptist because he ate too little They suspected Jesus because he ate too much. And because he drank wine. And because he was way too close to the wrong people.

John was simply too holy. Jesus was not holy enough. These charges make all very good reasons to reject them and refuse their challenge to turn back to God. The people of Jesus’ generation could get right back to name-calling, to dividing up the world into “us” and “them,” the righteous and the sinners, us and them - the defective, deranged, deficient.

This dynamic still works really well in our generation also. There are a million excuses to avoid your own stuff (your self, your sin, your weakness, your fear) by naming others. Think about teenagers (who are really just extreme, unrehabilitated versions of our selves) and the names they call each other – in the cafeteria and by the lockers, and now on websites, Facebook, “she’s a slut;” “he’s gay,” “she’s fat, ugly, poor...” whatever. Name calling is violent, more dangerous than sticks and stones – it literally kills. But not only teenagers do it - politicians do, and religious leaders do too.

In the time of Jesus the names you called others wasn’t “sluts” or welfare mothers, or illegal immigrants, but it was “tax collectors and sinners.” This is the phrase in the New Testament that stands for those out-of-bounds people, the “them” of the ancient world -sinners outside the boundaries of holiness, tax collectors who betrayed their people, women outside the marital system, prostitutes, made into objects by those who supported them.

I grew up in a situation of comparative privilege. My friends and I went to private school. We didn’t have to worry about physical danger or hunger. We could take education, acceptance, and safety for granted. Yet I remember grownups talking about “them,” those who brought the Hong Kong flue, the ones who vandalized and robbed and raped in the village across the railroad tracks, or the ones who got into the schools your kids couldn’t because of laws and quotas.

I looked around as a kid and saw insecure grown ups dealing with their own stuff, dividing up the world to make themselves OK.

I tried this too, but it didn't work perfectly. Because somewhere underneath I always knew that it wasn't virtue on my part, but good fortune that allowed me to stay on the right side of respectability. And it's still economic, marital, and temperamental LUCK that kept me in this side of the line and OK in the eyes of other. I have never had to choose between starvation and selling my soul, my principles, or my body, and then being named a tax collector or sinner.

My family valued good manners and propriety, order and dignity. (I still do). We had rules for the dinner table – no singing at the table. No reading at the table. No telling about your dreams.

Once upon a time there was a dinner party. Those who had been invited were all in the house, at their assigned places at the table, where they belonged: Simon, the other Pharisees, and their guest, Jesus. They were observing the rules of respectability.

Then in the middle of this orderly scene appears “a woman in the city who was a sinner.” There you go. All those names. She is labeled. She's from somewhere else, way outside the circle of OK-ness – she's from somewhere else and she's already condemned. She has no name, but clues, “sinner” and “city,” indicate that she is a prostitute, with no place in the legitimate marriage system or the regular economy.

She comes into the dinner with her alabaster jar of ointment and what does she do?

“She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment.”

Look what Luke's story lingers on. Notice these verbs. Weep, bathe, dry with hair, kiss, anoint with ointment. These are physical verbs, intimate verbs, loving verbs.

But for the people at the dinner, this is a PDA a public display of affection - (way worse than singing at the table). This is “Too Much Information.” This is really embarrassing, in that society so rigidly segregated by gender, class, and divided between sinners and righteous.

It's a society a lot like ours, in that there is stuff we know about — but that we don't want, as they say, “in our face.” We want to keep it far away from us, associate it with “them,” keep it across the tracks or in the closet or back in the city where it belongs.

But here she is, one of “them,” weeping, bathing, drying, kissing, anointing, wiping, bathing, kissing.

Simon is shocked. “If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him—that she is a sinner.”

This is a scandal – her extravagant demonstration of passion, breaking the rules, crossing the line, a sinner touching a prophet, a woman touching a man, in the middle of the dinner party.

But what is even more shocking is what happens next. Jesus rebukes Simon. And then he repeats and reiterates those intimate verbs.

“I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment.”

And he praises her. She has shown great love. She has been forgiven. Your faith has saved you. Go in peace.

The scandal in this story is not the scene the woman makes. It's not even Jesus' compassion for her.

The scandal is God's radical forgiveness and grace.

The liberal, scandalous love of God wrecks havoc with the lines we draw.

The woman from the city has been an object, she was someone else, then she becomes the subject, she is us, sinner forgiven, who shows extravagant love.

God's radical forgiveness and grace shows that the line between respectable and disreputable is a lie. The lie protects the righteous from knowledge of their sin. The lie tries to keep those who are labeled sluts and crooks out of the wide, wide circle of God's love. But the lie isn't true, and it doesn't really make us more secure. It can not make us OK.

The scandal of God's radical forgiveness and grace crashes through our favorite opposites.

The division between male and female, men who eat at dinner/women who entertain or serve or interrupt. No way. It doesn't hold up in the fire of God's grace – Jesus serves at table, and a woman from the city who is a sinner stands for human courage. And she receives blessing when she addresses God.

We think spiritual and physical love are two different things.

Not in light of God's scandalous grace.

Not when love for God is acted out with ointment and touching and tears and kisses.

A line between the righteous and Gentile sinners? Between holy and profane, between us and them? The labels won't keep you safe any more. They don't have the power to save.

The scandal of God's radical forgiveness and grace – Jesus acted this out in his life, and in his death he made it true for everyone. This is the gospel preached by St. Paul in his amazing, mystical, blissed-out exultation in the letter to the Galatians.

All your stuff – fears, guilt, doubt, rage – God has taken care of it. You are forgiven, accepted and loved. All the stuff you don't want in your face – God has taken care of that too – accepts, knows, and holds it. Here is real security, real privilege, and real freedom.

From this place of release and forgiveness, out of this place you can live. Not out of ego and defensiveness and violence but from compassion and love. "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me."

Your faith has saved you. Go in peace.

If we were to let ourselves receive God's radical forgiveness grace then even we might find ourselves drawn to come to the feet of Jesus and kneel down and do what she did - kiss, bath, wash, anoint, dry, weep, in security, thankfulness, and praise.

Thanks be to God. Amen.