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# The Good News is Great Love

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The mere mention of the word “scandal” sets us on edge. It implies what we thought trustworthy has been suddenly blown apart.

It’s a scandal if we claim equality under the law while an injustice makes a mockery of our courts or when someone violates trust with embezzlement. Headlines quickly label a person’s fall from grace without probing if it were a moment of poor judgment or fatal character flaw.

Regardless, to mend fractured trust demands time, transparency, and honest conversation about accountability. Whenever someone behaves out of the norm, we scramble to make sense of who they are and who we are.

What about when the opposite happens?

The pillars of a wealthy church in the Chicago suburbs had their tidy notions upended a little more than a decade ago. At the time, they revered the titans of the industry who built mansions along the lakefront also funded the buildings. When they received the largest sum ever given -- \$4 million – as a bequest, the pastor described it as “scandalous generosity.”

No one suspected the quiet couple who served and gave modestly year-after-year could amass such a gift from their earnings as a postal worker and librarian.

Good news can shatter us. We need to rebuild trust with ourselves through honest soul-searching at how wrong we are or were about the limits or labels we place on each other.

Today's story of good news is all about disruptions.

*Dear God, Open our minds. Soften our heart. Make us brave. Send your spirit among these ancient words that we hear your voice and accept your great love. Amen*

### **Luke 7:36-50**

<sup>36</sup> One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and when he went into the Pharisee's house he reclined to dine. <sup>37</sup> And a woman in the city who was a sinner, having learned that Jesus was eating in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment.

<sup>38</sup> She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair, kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment.

<sup>39</sup> Now when the Pharisee who had invited Jesus saw it, he said to himself, "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."

<sup>40</sup> Jesus spoke up and said to him, “*Simon, I have something to say to you.*”

“Teacher,” Simon replied, “speak.”

<sup>41</sup> “A certain moneylender had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. <sup>42</sup> When they could not pay, he canceled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?”

<sup>43</sup> Simon answered, “I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt.” And Jesus said to him, “You have judged rightly.”

<sup>44</sup> Then turning toward the woman, he said to Simon,

***“Do you see this woman?”***

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.

<sup>45</sup> You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in  
she has not stopped kissing my feet.

<sup>46</sup> You did not anoint my head with oil,  
but she has anointed my feet with ointment.

<sup>47</sup> Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven;  
hence she has shown great love.

But the one to whom little is forgiven loves  
little.”

<sup>48</sup> Then Jesus said to her, “Your sins are forgiven.”

<sup>49</sup> But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, “Who is this who even forgives sins?”

<sup>50</sup> But Jesus said to the woman, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.”

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Even though each gospel writer enshrines this lesson – of a scandalous woman, her scandalous past, her scandalous love, and our rigid expectations, Luke story makes us squirm. It asks us to open our eyes to see her, Jesus, and ourselves.

Early in Jesus’ ministry, Simon invites Jesus to a dinner party. No doubt curious about the young rabbi garnering both praise and outrage, Simon might think, why not check out the new prophet?

Perhaps he’ll have some fascinating approach to scriptures as when he shocked the crowd in Nazareth by quoting Isaiah in his first sermon. Maybe he’ll offer wow them with a miracle or two – parlor tricks to ensure a party is memorable and reflect well on the host. If nothing else, Jesus’s presence might make for interesting chit-chat once they send him on his way.

So, Simon extends the invitation — and Jesus accepts. The guests recline around a table. They settle in for a few hours of good food and lively conversation.

Enter the woman with the alabaster jar. In Luke's account, the woman is unnamed and unwelcome — "a woman in the city, who was a sinner."

Even though introduced as a Pharisee, an enforcer of the law, Luke discloses to us just how embedded Simon is in his view of the world.

“Now when the Pharisee who had invited Jesus saw it, he said to himself, ‘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.’” (Lk 7:39)

He judges appearance. He judges reputation. He proves that being shallow is easy. (In the first century, a character's internal monologue alters the reader that person already knows their ideas are not fit to be spoken.)

She kneels before Jesus. Ignoring all else present, she lavishes him with her gifts – herself. She kisses. She weeps. Our translation loses the impact of the Greek. She “rains” or she “drenches” his feet with her tears.

All the while watching, Simon is nothing less than disgusted – not only with the woman, but with Jesus who tolerates her.

Jesus asks him: "Simon, do you see this woman?"

It's a biting question because no, Simon doesn't see her. He doesn't see her humanity, her generosity, her capacity for deep and embodied love.

Neither, in fact, does he see Jesus's humanity – the dusty feet in need of cool water, the sunbaked skin in need of soothing ointment, the ever-giving, savior who welcomes affection and a loving touch.

Though he accuses Jesus of ignorance, Simon is the one who is both blind and rigid. There is a cost to seeing. There is a cost to looking beneath the surface when it could disrupt the status quo. Looking only on appearances and trusting social judgements keeps him at a distance. Maybe that's Simon's way of skating through life and staying safe.

To only look on the surface, to see only enough to confirm the labels he places upon them – she's a sinner and Jesus an itinerant rabbi – means he doesn't need to reveal anything about himself. No point in becoming vulnerable with someone beneath his means.

Did Jesus set him on edge further by saying “I have something to say to you”? I imagine Simon spat out “speak.”

Jesus tells a simple parable of forgiveness as a financial transaction – most likely to hold Simon’s attention as he describes the scandalous generosity God offers.

Even though Simon presents himself as a paragon of faith. Perhaps he harbors some fears if forgiveness could free him from the past, or the power of forgiveness that would encourage him to take risks and move outside the artificial limits he places upon himself. Maybe he fears the power of forgiveness to open his world.

Simon doesn't recognize his need for grace. She does. Simon’s capacity for love is thin. Her love is scandalous.

Jesus confronts Simon with an upside-down truth: the woman he dismisses is the one who sees most clearly. And this reversal, that those on the margins becoming the bearers of truth, has echoed throughout the church’s life.

No one wants to look like a fool, and yet, just like Simon, even the church proves just how easily we fall prey to letting ourselves presume we know what’s right and who’s wrong.

Throughout the medieval ages low-level clerics and peasants held a festival to parody church rituals and inverted the hierarchies. They filled the sanctuaries with people costumed as drag-queens, cross-dressing, wearing masks, or parading as an animal. Some brought their actual donkeys near the altar while drinking, and I don't mean sacramental wine. They appointed a Mock Pope or Bishop of Fools.

Historians *disagree* on just what that "Feast of Fools" looked like even though it occurred each year. Those parodied wanted the tawdry affairs to just fade into oblivion and the peasants who staged it lacked quill and ink. Historians *do agree*: the Feast of Fools inverted the hierarchy when the lowest took charge.

And maybe they played games and sang silly songs. But maybe they just delivered the gospel message as they heard it from the bottom rung of the ladder. Maybe they dared to notice honor accorded to bishops and popes and the disrepute in which Jesus was held when he walked this earth. Maybe they said something uncomfortable like, "the first shall be last." The powerful hate that kind of thing.

The Feast of Fools wasn't meant to humiliate the church even though it was decreed a scandal in 1435. It was meant to save it — to shake it awake, to remind it of the God who lifts up the lowly and fills the hungry with good things. Those in power are

often the last to recognize grace when it comes from the *wrong* person. Sometimes grace disrupts us so we can become more honest, more humble, more like Christ.

This is the work of Lent: to learn to see. And to let Jesus meet us there with forgiveness.

The good news of great love teaches us to see as Jesus sees — past reputation, past assumption, past our fear — all the way into the heart. That's the scandal of grace, and it's meant for every one of us.

*May God give you grace to never sell yourself short,  
Grace to risk something big for something good,  
And grace to remember that the world is too dangerous  
for anything but truth and too small for anything but love.*  
William Sloan Coffin

**Reference:**

1. This sermon is part of a series published by *A Sanctified Art* entitled "Tell Me Something Good." The commentary by Rev. Lizzie McManus-Dail and artists' statements of their creative inspiration also inspired me.
2. Journey with Jesus - What the Body Knows

All sorts of rabbit holes from Google searches to explore and substantiate what I recall learning about the Feast of Fools.





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