

June 13, 2010
Luke 7:36-8:3

Making Saints Out Of Sinners

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.
Amen.

Scandals

Tiger Woods. John Edwards. Eliot Spitzer. The list goes on. Scandals abound. And does sin and sinners. Quiet sinners and notorious sinners. Religious sinners and unchurched sinners. People who make their living by exposing others transgressions, and people who make their living flaunting those same transgressions.

We are sinners, all of us. Somehow, somehow we and our relationships with God and neighbor are broken. It's what we all have in common. Still, remarkably, it's news, big news when people succumb even to ordinary evil.

When John Edwards publicly admitted to an affair with Rielle Hunter in August 2008, he told ABC's Bob Woodruff ...

"This is what happened. It's what happened with me and I think happens unfortunately ... with other people.... Ego. Self-focus, self-importance.

I went from being a senator, a young senator to being considered for vice president, running for president, being a vice presidential candidate and becoming a national public figure. All of which fed a self-focus, an egotism, a narcissism that leads you to believe that you can do whatever you want. You're invincible. And there will be no consequences. And nothing, nothing could be further from the truth."

Ego. Self-focus. Self-importance. Gateway sins that lead to big transgressions. And everyone gets hurt. Even the Great King David, God's own, hand-picked anointed one, isn't immune. He is unquestionably Israel's greatest king, a man after God's own heart, and he's the model for the Messiah. But David's great fall from grace is a story of sex, murder and lies of Biblical proportions, a story to rival any we've heard uncovered.

The cynical among us know that sooner or later even the best are bound to fall. It's just a matter when, where and how hard. We so expect scandal that just the hint of inappropriate behavior can become scandal in and of itself. No wonder a prominent religious figure like Simon the Pharisee bristles when Jesus – who is still wildly popular at this point in the story – seems to flirt with scandal. When this (a-hem) woman of the city, this common sinner, enters the party, weeps and kisses Jesus' feet and then anoints them with ointment.

The scene offends Simon. Stunned by this woman's sensual and emotional display, he wonders why Jesus doesn't send her away. Deny all knowledge. Pay her no attention. Send her on her way. Yet, who knows, maybe in the back of his mind Simon fears that his party will be the locale for the downfall of another promising young leader.

The Page 6 writers ready for print the headline, “The Prophet and The Prostitute.” TMZ readies pictures from an anonymous insider, of course, of this woman all over Jesus’ feet.

Pick Up the Pieces and Make Something New

Still, I wonder sometimes if how we react to scandal and rumor, our appetite for lurid gossip reveals a lot more about us than the actual people we suspect of public sin.

And I wonder if the same can be said of our God. How God reacts to scandal reveals much about who God is and what God is doing in the world.

Yet, God goes about uncovering scandalous behavior in a radically different way than our “gotcha” gossips. With God, there is always the intent to reconcile, restore and redeem. God looks to expose us for who we are, yes, but with forgiveness and redemption as the ultimate goal. It is not enough for God to uncover the truth and force us to confess our transgressions. God wants to heal, to set things straight, to pick up the pieces and put us back together again, to forgive what is owed. In short God acts in love.

Notice how God works. Nathan the prophet masterfully weaves a story that seduces King David into pronouncing judgment on his own misdeeds: “This man deserves to die!” But the story doesn’t end there. David, judged by his own words, falls stunned by the gravity of his own injustice. He falls weeping to God’s feet and begs forgiveness. Nathan gives it. He delivers God’s Word of unconditional love, forgiveness, reconciliation, life and new beginning.

There are consequences that will play out in the lives of David and his kingdom for years to come, but God’s promise remains steadfast, and God’s love for David remains unmoved, even as his administration starts to crumble. God loves David. It’s a promise. By the end of the story God has made a saint out of a sinner with a word of forgiveness and love.

Jesus, too, shows us the redemptive will and loving heart of the Father. Notice how Jesus judges with same measure that each one judges. Gives to each according to their faith and expectations

The woman who seeks redemption and forgiveness receives it. The Pharisee who looks to judge and fault-find gets knit-picked by the law.

The woman who looks for love finds it. The Pharisee who shows no mercy finds no mercy.

Sin breeds sin, and no one benefits from fault-finding and condemnation. Jesus knows that. The Pharisee’s silent condemnation only makes matters worse, locks both he and she in their brokenness, indebted to each other. On the other hand, Jesus’ word that forgives and loves generates love and forgiveness. Jesus saves her by his word of grace, mercy and love. And that is God’s heart and God’s mission: to bring us life and salvation.

Jesus turns the tables on Simon the Pharisee by forgiving the woman and showing the proud Pharisee his own sin. But even this isn’t to embarrass him or to condemn him. Jesus looks to uncover and forgive, heal and love the self-righteous of their self-righteousness. This too is sin. Jesus dies to take away our self-righteousness too.

Saints from Sinners

What about of us, people of Faith? Who are you?

The sinner looking for forgiveness, healing, love and acceptance? A little shelter from the condemnation of self and others? Well, here it is. Come boldly, brazenly to Christ for forgiveness.

Or are you the self-righteous Pharisee, quick to point out obvious – that people live lives trapped by sin. Well, Jesus loves you too. And there is no end to sin for any of us – whether we sin in secret or on the street corner. There is no end to sin, ... except death. And Jesus died and rose to say to each and everyone of us: “You are forgiven. I love you.”

Notorious sinner of self-righteous bully, both find new life and a new way living and relating to each other in Jesus’ company.

At the end of our story (Luke 8:1-3), we discover about this group of women – outcasts all, but independent women of means who have found a place in the company of Jesus’ disciples. Jesus loves these women. It’s scandalous, I know. But Jesus loves these women and in his company they have found new life, new identity and new worth. They have found that they are, in spite of what anyone says, God’s precious children. Because of his love for them, they love Jesus. They love him a lot. They love him with all they have and all they own and all God is making them to be.

I imagine that to be the testimony of many of us, too. We are the sinners God has formed into saints. Like these women, we have found love in and with Jesus.

So, we have some important work to do in our scandal plagued world. Ours is not to make sinners out of sinners – that doesn’t do anyone any good and there are enough people doing that already.

No, instead think of it like this. God has entrusted us with a fortune and sent us to spend it, to cancel debt. That’s what it means to partner with God’s Holy Spirit in God’s work of making saints out of sinners. You know, in the same way God cancelled our debt by giving us and inheritance of grace and mercy is Jesus. The grace and love of God that reaches out to forgive and restore sets us and the whole world free to live in love too.

We’re going to find sin. Scandals will come and go. But all that really tells us is where to go to start picking up the pieces and setting things straight with God’s word that says, “You’re forgiven. I love you.” This Word of God’s grace and love makes saints out of sinners. In Jesus’ name. Amen.