

“Shame Cracked Open to Let in Love”

Matthew 26:6-13

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It was never about helping the poor.

The disciples watched the woman approach Jesus, witnessed her pick up the jar of oil and pour it out above him. The oil streamed across Jesus’ hair and dripped down his face. As the disciples watched this scene before them, they became angry.

Their eyebrows scrunched. Their eyes narrowed. Their shoulders tensed. Their voices raised as their anger poured out of their mouth. Their words dripped with scorn as they chastised this woman for being wasteful, for spending money on expensive oil when it could have gone to the poor.

But their anger was never about helping the poor.

It was about the woman. It was about the way she dared to step into the center of the room, surrounded by men who had more of a right to be there. It was about the way she approached their leader and teacher with both intimacy and authority. It was about daring to do something that hadn’t been done before.

You see, in Jesus’ time, anointing someone was a ceremonial act that was reserved for very important people on very important occasions, such as a king before their coronation. It was an act that was performed by a priest or a prophet, in other words: a man.

This woman dared to perform a ceremonial ritual that had been reserved for men with power.

The disciples’ anger was about the woman, but in trying to get Jesus to side with them, they used the poor to make their case. They tried to persuade Jesus that their hearts were with the poor and the needy and this woman was hurting those who suffer the most by what she had just done.

This is how public shaming operates. It is very rare that when someone is shamed by who they are or what they have done that we address it head on. Instead, we distort our contempt and create a secondary concern that we rise to the top, the secondary concern being something that good folks can get behind and support us on. We hide the true target of our scorn or our anger or our hatred and we twist our outrage until it seems reasonable to others.

Imagine being handed a Rubik's Cube with dots of color mixed up on each side of the cube, each one representing an argument to keep things the way they were or keep certain people in power over others. You twist and turn the Cube, trying to make the colors line up and make sense, but instead the colors keep shifting and you don't know how you will ever sort them out. This is the puzzle we are handed whenever shame is in action. For example:

When women entered the workforce in the mid-20th century, people certainly didn't have a problem with women working, but they were concerned about the children left at home. You had to twist and turn the words that were proclaimed to clearly see the backlash against working mothers, to see the men threatened by women earning their own income and independence or competing for the same jobs. The stated concern was for the children.

When reproductive rights were stripped away by the courts last year, people were just concerned about the children. They worried no one was thinking of the children and they felt called to protect them at all costs, even if cost is the life of the one who is pregnant, or the cost is that person's physical health or mental health if forced to carry a pregnancy to term. You have to puzzle your way through to realize they weren't thinking about the ones who are pregnant at all. The stated concern was for the children.

And finally, when drag queens read books in libraries or host brunches in family restaurants, people are concerned about - who else - the children. They worry that books and pancakes in the company of fabulous gowns and fancy wigs will corrupt our children beyond repair so they must be banned. Similarly, preventing parents and doctors and teachers from supporting the gender expression of trans children isn't at all a backlash about controlling other people's bodies, a backlash against trans rights and LGBTQ+ progress. The stated concern is for the children.

Each of these examples uses children as a smokescreen for the true target of the outrage. The targets - women living out their lives in various ways, trans folk trying to live as God meant them to be - are shamed by those who are in power because of the perceived neglect or harm they are causing to children. Those in power know they can't come out and directly say, "We don't like women." Or "We only like women when they stay in the boxes we have created for them." So instead, they build public support by holding up a target, one that is universally understood to be needing protection, and say, "Look at what these women are doing to the children. Look how these drag queens and trans folks are harming our kids."

But it isn't about protecting the children, just as the disciples outrage at the woman who anoints Jesus was never about helping the poor.

Jesus knew some things about the way people shamed one another. After all, he was the one who intervened when a woman accused of adultery was paraded in front of a crowd for punishment. He was the one who healed a man with a withered hand even when the people around him were more concerned about following the rules of the Sabbath day. He was the one who spoke with the Canaanite woman even though he was told to stay away from her kind. He saw past the

smokescreens that other people used to keep each other separate and to keep certain kinds of people in their rightful place.

When the disciples cry out, “What a waste! All that money this woman spent could have gone to help the poor!” Jesus responds, “Oh, now you want to help the poor? Every time I tell you to feed crowds you complain and every time I try to heal someone you whine, but now you want to help the poor?” He says, “You’ll have plenty of chances to help the poor. They will always be here and helping them will always be your call. But I am only here for a little while longer, and in recognizing that, this woman has honored me by her actions.”

Jesus takes down the smokescreen and reminds the disciples that two things can be true at once. You can be called to help the poor and called to honor someone through an extravagant act. You can protect children and protect women. You can protect children, including trans children.

In reminding the disciples that the world is not either/or, it is both/and, Jesus breaks open the shame that the disciples try to inflict on the woman and he lets in love. He reorients them toward the love embedded in her gesture. He centers her generosity, her act of ritual service in the way she anointed him.

Jesus proclaims that, “What she has done will be told in remembrance of her.” These words mirror the words Jesus goes on to speak at the Last Supper when he takes bread, breaks it, and says, “This is my body, do this in remembrance of me.” The loving act of this woman becomes a foreshadowing of the love given from Jesus to his disciples in the Last Supper, the same love we share each time we gather at the communion table in remembrance of that supper.

In this Gospel story, we hear the call to crack open shame and let in love. To stop with the smokescreens and the cries to protect one group of people at the expense of someone else’s dignity or life. We hear a call to question and dig deeper whenever someone tells us that this group of people must be legislated against under the guise of protecting someone else. Who is really the target? What is the message underneath the savvy messaging? How might we solve the Rubik’s Cube we are handed until each side matches up, colors with like colors, and we can see the shame that has been twisted and turned at someone else’s expense?

To let in love means to turn ourselves towards those who are the target of shame.

Jesus honored the actions of the woman when others would scorn her. So too are we called to listen to women when they say they have been harmed or shamed. So too are we to listen to our trans siblings when they say it wasn’t really about drag queens or children, but about someone else’s desire to keep their true, beautiful, trans selves hidden and boxed in.

Loves says: I see you. Love says: I am listening to you. Love says: I will protect you.

May it be so.