

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA

June 27, 2021 – PENTECOST 5 / PROPER 8B

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Sermon: “*Scandal? Or Unmerited Grace?*”

Wisdom of Solomon 1:13-15; 2:23-24 (God did not create us for death)

Lamentations 3:21-33 (Our hope is in the Lord who does not willingly grieve us)

2 Corinthians 8:7-15 (Paul encourages the Corinthians to give generously, as God has given to us)

St. Mark 5:21-43 (Jesus heals a longsuffering woman and a young girl)

Maybe you saw the 1974 movie “The Godfather, Part II.” In that film, the Mafia godfather, Don Corleone, goes to Rome to negotiate a business deal with the Vatican. He’s not interested simply in business; he wants to gain respectability. There in Rome he meets with Cardinal Lamberto, who asks the don if he would like to make his confession. At first Corleone refuses. He makes a little joke about how “it would take too long.” On the other hand, he wants the cardinal’s help, and senses something redemptive in the prelate’s presence. So, Corleone begins his confession.

First, he recounts his marital infidelities. Then, he admits to ordering the murder of his own brother. Overwhelmed by the burden of his guilt, he breaks down and starts to sob. Cardinal Lamberto pronounces the words of absolution, then says, “I know you don’t believe this, but you have been redeemed.”

Some may find this story scandalous. Here we have a career criminal, an adulterer who is cold-blooded enough to plot the killing of his own brother. Yet, he’s said to be forgiven, redeemed. Some might say what’s called for is not mercy, but retribution, revenge, a settling of scores. Let the Mafioso taste some of his own medicine!

If there’s a scandal here, it’s the “scandal” of God’s mercy. Undergirding Cardinal Lamberto’s words is the blood of Jesus, who takes away the sins of the world. Moreover, the Holy Spirit appears to be hard at work in this encounter with Don Corleone. The Holy Spirit cracks open the hard heart of the Mafia boss, and gives him tears of repentance for the horrors he has committed. This scene of confession becomes a sort of resurrection, as Don Corleone is raised from death brought by his sins, into the new life Christ offers him.¹

Some may still be offended by the seeming injustice of such redemption. But when God’s grace is manifest, particularly in Jesus Christ, something of a scandal always happens. Consider today’s Gospel. Jesus has been asked by Jairus, a leader in the local synagogue, to heal his daughter who is dying. What’s surprising about this, is that Jesus, the itinerant preacher, was not particularly welcome in most Jewish houses of worship, so it is somewhat scandalous already that Jairus would ask this unlicensed rabbi to minister to his sick child.

But because Jesus’s heart is filled with compassion, *and* He has God’s authority and power to heal, He readily agrees to accompany Jairus to his home. On the way there, they encounter a woman who has been hemorrhaging for more than a decade. Here comes the next scandal: No Jewish male was permitted to touch a woman that wasn’t his family member, and anyone with a bleeding issue was considered so “unclean” that no devout Jew would have physical contact with such a person. Because this poor suffering woman, whom the doctors have been unable to cure, knows how the social and religious code works, she yearns to simply touch Jesus’ *clothing*, believing with faith so powerful this alone will heal her at long last. *And it does!* She is *made well!* Although St. Mark does not tell us whether Jesus touched the woman, Christ did choose to *interact* with her (another “no-no” in that culture), saying to her tenderly, “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.”

No sooner had Jesus healed this desperate woman, than people from Jairus’ household come running to report that the girl has died. Does Jesus express His sincere condolences and move on? No! Even in the face of this terrible news, He invites Jairus not to fear, but to simply *believe*. Jesus continues on to the official’s house, accompanied by three of His closest, most trusted disciples—Peter, James, and John—who, likely, were also our Lord’s greatest “prayer warriors.”

Upon arriving, they find the professional mourners are there already, carrying out their role when a member of the community has died: they wail, beat their chests, pull out their hair, and rip their clothing, ritualizing the anguish that death’s final separation brings. Yet, their frenzied actions are devoid of hope.

Those gathered even laugh at Jesus when he insists the girl is not dead, only sleeping. How could He *say* such a thing, mocking their grief. *More scandal!* Along with the girl's parents, Jesus goes in to where she has been laid out. He takes her by the hand—showing us the importance of healing touch, even as He violates a bunch of Jewish purity laws—and instructs her to arise. And *she does!* The child gets up (Mark says “immediately”—one of his favorite words), and Jesus recommends that she be given something to eat. After all, we learn that she is twelve years old—still a growing girl.

What was the scandal of Jesus touching this child, even in a respectful way? Well, according to God's law in the Hebrew scriptures, touching a *corpse* rendered a person seriously *unclean*. Becoming “unclean” would mean religious rejection and social isolation until the person fulfilled all the ritual laws and actions that would restore the person's purity. No doubt, the people around Jesus were as shocked by His behavior in that day, as those in our time were, when, in the “Godfather” saga, Cardinal Lamberto absolved Don Corleone.

In today's Gospel story, we see Jesus interacting in compassionate, tender, gentle, healing ways with both a bleeding woman and a child's corpse—*so* “off-limits” in that culture, we can't even *imagine* the degree of scandal this caused! Even so, Jesus is always more concerned about *people* over punditry, *life* over law, and *resurrection* over rules.

This Gospel story ends with Jesus ordering everyone strictly not to tell about this miracle He has made possible. But why? Shouldn't the whole world know about His love and power? Well, just possibly, Jesus doesn't want to be labeled simply as the go-to guy when somebody is fatally ill and the doctor's too busy, or you need bread and fish multiplied for your next neighborhood picnic.

Instead, our Lord wants people to know Him for what is still to come—that work of grace more scandalous than any other, when He will die on a cross of shame and be raised in glory by God the Father. *That* scandal will bring grace, not just to one person or a few, but to all of Creation. It will mean not only new life for the long-suffering woman and Jairus' daughter, who were dying or dead, but also new life for the Don Corleones of this world, who, spiritually speaking, have been walking corpses.

Not only today, but every day of our lives, we should remember and celebrate the greatest of all God's scandals: Jesus' cross and resurrection. Many people simply cannot stomach it. They want a redemption that is less violent, one that seems more fair, and in their minds, makes more sense. Instead, we are given undeserved mercies; fear that gives way to faith; and countless small blessings everywhere in our lives; all of which are “scandalized” by the unlimited, unconditional generosity of God.

They see a Mafia godfather, a man with a steel heart and a ruthless life. God sees His child, hard heart now broken, tears flooding forth, dead to his past and given a fresh start.

They see a law-breaking rabbi who touches an unclean woman *and* a corpse. *God* sees His long-suffering daughter made whole, and a once-dead girl now restored to her parents' arms.

They see a hapless victim dying dishonorably on a cross. *God* sees the sacrificial Lamb victorious over evil, hell, and death itself.

So often what we, too, see is scandal; but what *God* sees is mercy, love, and grace. Our Lord calls us to prayerfully ask that our eyes and hearts may be opened to recognize His grace when it happens, sometimes right in front of our faces. Are we willing to be party to the divine scandal that may shock the rest of the world, but nevertheless releases the power of resurrection? Each of us has been on the receiving end of reconciliation with God, for Christ always addresses us through the words of Cardinal Lamberto: “I know you don't believe this, but you *have been* redeemed.”

Then, to further pile on outrageous scandal, Christ calls *us* to be ministers of reconciliation in this contentious and divided world; in our alienated and conflicted families; anywhere that healing and wholeness of every kind is needed. His audacious expectation is that we who have been forgiven will forgive, and we who have been granted new life will offer new life to others. It may mean making room for undeserved mercies for ourselves and for others, understanding that all are sinners and all who accept Christ's forgiveness are redeemed. May God enable us to recognize those opportunities when they are placed before us. And may we see past scandal and be open to, and welcome His grace. *Amen.*

¹ Adapt. Charles Hoffacker, “Maybe You Saw the Movie,” 2 July 2006, <<https://www.episcopalchurch.org/sermon/maybe-you-saw-the-movie-proper-8-b-2006/>> 18 June 2021. Used with permission.