

“Nobody’s Perfect” – Rev. Jennifer Adams
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It’s interesting to me that a story can be both beautiful and uncomfortable all at the same time. The gospel story we just heard is one of those kinds of stories: rich in its power yet a little awkward in its content. The story about the woman with the alabaster jar is a tender story of reception and forgiveness and yet the way in which the events unfolded made everyone who was there that day and maybe even some of us a little squirly.

Because the woman’s actions were extravagant and open and unrehearsed and it’s not our usual vision of confession and forgiveness. This wasn’t an appropriately private experience with the sinner in all alone confessing to a priest or pastor behind a curtain with nobody else witnessing or listening. This was a relatively public scene in the home of a Pharisee with Jesus, the disciples and probably some other guests engaged eating a meal and likely engaged in some sort of theological conversation. And then this woman entered the scene. And she broke all the rules. Her hair was down. Her tears were flowing. She touched Jesus’ feet and she spread ointment on them. She kissed his feet and dried her tears when they fell on them. Beautiful but awkward. The host was immediately, predictably unsure about what to do. The disciples and other witnesses wondered why Jesus was allowing this to happen let alone continue. And the Pharisee eventually suggested that the woman should leave and that Jesus had crossed the line in terms of offering her reception and forgiveness.

And part of what this story reveals is that forgiveness shatters our expectations of how the world should work. And frankly extravagant confessions and public remorse shatters expectations too. And so we get uncomfortable. Jesus should never have let the woman near him. That’s how it should have gone. Jesus should have announced her as a sinner rather than received her as one bearing gifts. The woman should have kept her tears to herself and her hair properly covered up. The religious leaders should have been honored for their faith, not this woman who had done notoriously wrong. That’s how it should have played out. But it didn’t.

And so I want to tell you another story. And quite honestly, there’s a part of me that hesitates to take the next step because in order to further open up this story about one of the bravest women in Scripture, I’m going to tell you a story about baseball. And that feels like I’m not being quite as feminist as I should be when the lectionary gives me this woman, Mary Magdalene, Joanna and Susanna. Just please promise me that when you leave this morning you’ll remember that these women are in the gospel playing important role in Jesus’ preaching and teaching and spreading the good news! OK? OK – baseball.

And you don’t have to be a baseball fan to follow this story because it was the top news story for about three days a couple of weeks ago. And like the gospel story, it was both awkward and beautiful. And let me tell you as a Tiger’s fan it’s not without religious meaning.

You know the story. Detroit. June 2nd Tigers versus Indians. Bottom of the ninth inning, two outs and Tiger pitcher Armando Galarraga had a perfect game going. Which means that in eight and two thirds innings, nobody on the other team had made it to first base. No hits. No walks.

No hit batters. Nothing. Galarraga's pitching had been literally perfect and that has happened only twenty times in the history of baseball. And he was about to be number twenty-one. So one more out was needed and Jason Donald of the Cleveland Indians hit a grounder; the ball was fielded the throw was made to Galarraga who was covering first base and everyone in the stadium, both dugouts and actually everyone in the world thought the game was over.

Except for the first base umpire. The first base umpire Jim Joyce called Donald safe. And first there was absolute dead silence and then, there was a lot of yelling and a lot of protesting. Even the Cleveland Indians thought Joyce had made a bad call. And replay after replay proved that Donald should have been called out. But the call stood. Safe at first. Perfect game ruined. And I still get a little teary when I talk about it.

But the amazing thing was how this then played out. At the end of the game, the umpire who made the mistake asked to talk to Galarraga. And that umpire, Jim Joyce had tears in his eyes as he stood face-to-face with Galarraga apologized for the call. He told him that he'd gotten it wrong and he was sorry. That was amazing moment number one – and talk about socially awkward. In case you didn't know, umpires don't cry. Especially when the cameras are running.

And then amazing moment number two: Galarraga accepted the apology and the tears, and he said, "It's OK. Nobody's perfect." Which wasn't only gracious. It was kind of funny. Nobody's perfect? And then, Galarraga who had just been robbed of his place in history, gave the ump a hug. What? Players and umps don't hug. Especially immediately following one of the worst calls in all of history.

And at that very moment bars and family rooms and websites were full of voices screaming for the call to be reversed, the umpire to be suspended, instant replay to be integrated more fully into major league baseball, the perfect game to be added as at least a footnote to the record books. One interview I heard the next day said that at the very least, Joyce never should have admitted to getting it wrong. "He should have left the field at the end of the game!" And another interview said that Galarraga could have accepted the apology, but then asked, "Did he really have to hug the guy?"

It was beautiful and it was awkward. And my guess is that the process of forgiveness when done on a public scale is always both of those things. Privately, it's not the easiest thing either, but at least the world isn't watching when it happens one on one. And that's why we don't see it very often. Occasionally there is a staged moment where a public figure comes forward and offers his or her version of "I want the world to hear me say, I'm sorry," but rarely is the moment as genuine, as raw as it was with the woman and the ointment, or the umpire and the tears. Rarely is it as well received as Jesus and the sinner or Galarraga and the apologetic ump.

Imagine if instead of explanations or lack thereof there were oil executives sobbing or religious leaders anointing those whom they've hurt. Imagine if the leaders of hate-based organizations came forward with tears in their eyes and face-to-face apologized to those whom they persecute. The world would be a different place.

And I suppose that's the point of this story. Forgiveness changes things. Awkward, sure. Beautiful, yeah. World changing? No doubt. And in life nobody gets to claim a perfect game, which is part of the gospel's point too. Everyone at the Pharisee's house that night needed forgiveness; it's just that the woman's sins were known. Every ump, player, reporter and fan who watched these recent events unfold has made a bad call, has made more than one bad call in their life. It's just that for most of us, the world wasn't watching when we mad them. Perfect isn't possible. The good news is that forgiveness was and still is an option.

Amen.