

“Abnormal”
The Reverend Michael L. Delk
St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky
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Luke 7:36 – 8:3

In college, I took a course called “Abnormal Psychology.” It dealt with the causes, diagnosis, and treatment of mental health issues. During our first class, I asked the professor, “Who decides what’s normal?” and he said, “The majority of people who professionally study or practice psychology?” I responded, “Yes, but what if the people in that deciding majority are actually insane?” It was a long semester, but I’m far from the only one who really wants to know what normal really is.

We yearn for normal in a world of rapid change where it’s become increasingly hard to define normal in an enduring way, with so many competing ideas about what it is or should be. We pine for the “good ‘ole days,” whenever or whatever those might have been, idealizing in our minds a past sanitized of suffering and injustice, like the 1950’s. Yes, it was a time of stability, conformity, and prosperity, where everybody knew what was normal, a halcyon era, unless you were black or a woman or gay or mentally ill. And if you were all four in the 1950’s, God help you.

In the midst of this confusion, we delve into scripture searching for norms that will put us on the path of certainty, consistency, and predictability, and there’s wisdom to this, until we discover that the Bible isn’t the best place to look for normal. It’s a series of stories that show how God constantly invades ordinary life with surprise and the supernatural, with transformation and transcendence, and with the upheaval of social order. Unless we stay on the surface of these stories, refusing to plummet the depths, unless we tame these stories, domesticate them to complement our sensibilities, they often shock us right to the core.

For instance, it was a lovely evening for dinner with Jesus at the Pharisees' house, until "a woman in the city, who was a sinner," code-language for "she was of ill repute," "brought an alabaster jar of ointment," and started pouring it on Jesus' feet. Even if she had been the paragon of virtue, this act would have been scandalous: the extravagance, the intimacy, the sensuality of it all; the embarrassment of the host as she wept publicly, kissed the feet of Jesus and wiped them with her hair.

Of course, we know how the story ends, how Jesus validated the woman for what she did, and that takes some of the sharpness out of it, but if we can linger in that single moment, before the parable and the pardon, if we can occupy the sandals of the Pharisee and the other guests for the briefest instant, we too might shudder in disgust as they did. Indeed, if a strange woman walked in here right now and did the same to any one of us, just imagine the reaction.

The experience would be the very epitome of abnormal. I thought about hiring an actor to come in and choose somebody at random and kiss and cry over and anoint their feet, but I worried that someone might have a heart attack. If it did happen, though, it would be the sole topic of conversation in the parish for months, and years later, people would tell the tale of the day when the crazy lady interrupted worship, bawling her eyes out and smearing somebody's feet with ointment.

Now you'd think that the Pharisee, deeply offended, would have scolded this crazy, abnormal woman, but he said nothing. She was beneath his contempt. However, he thought to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him," and Jesus knew what the Pharisee was thinking and told a parable about two men, each of whom owed massive debts: 50 and 500 denarii. To give you some context, a

denarius was the common daily wage, so if you're 50 denarii in the hole, that's a couple months' wages, which makes a 500 denarii debt equal to nearly two years' wages.

In the parable, the creditor cancelled both debts, and Jesus asked Pharisee a simple question, "Which of them will love him more?" The Pharisee gave the obvious answer, the guy with the greater debt. Then Jesus criticized the Pharisee for not offering appropriate hospitality. He didn't even give Jesus a basin of water for him to wash his own feet, much less do it himself. He didn't greet him with a kiss or anoint his head with oil. These were typical acts of hospitality, and the Pharisee did none of them. He owed Jesus better.

So in light of her radical generosity, her utter lack of concern for dignity and propriety, Jesus forgave the woman's sins, because "she has shown great love." Now you'd think that nothing could top what this woman did, but in the eyes of the dinner guests, what Jesus did was even more scandalous, more abnormal. They wondered, "Who is this who even forgives sins?" Only God can do that. Jesus was skirting the edges of blasphemy here.

Now all of us sin. All of us owe God an unpayable debt, some perhaps more than others, but all of us owe an insurmountable debt. How do we respond to this reality? Mostly, we ignore it. We keep ourselves as busy as possible so that we don't have time to notice it. It's just too painful, too intimidating to be honest about the wrong we've done and the harm we've caused and how we've repeatedly betrayed God by breaking our baptismal covenant. But on our better days, we seek God in prayer or in worship and ask God's forgiveness, sincerely and humbly, and nothing more is necessary. Yet the hardest part isn't asking God to forgive us. The hardest part is receiving it with gratitude and then forgiving ourselves. That's the hardest part, forgiving ourselves, because the idea that God says, "We're even," again and again and again is just so abnormal in a world that collects every debt with a vengeance.

But how can we get there? How can we get to the point where we can let the forgiveness of God into our hearts? Imitate the sinful woman who crashed the dinner party. Let your love shine forth in acts of adoration. Now you don't have to kiss somebody's feet and wash them with your tears and dry them with your hair. That was her unique way of expressing her profound faith and love and gratitude, but in that solitary act, we still find a way to follow.

What this nameless woman did, at its most basic level, was to pour herself out to Jesus. All the guilt and remorse, all the feelings of inadequacy and hopelessness and of not fitting in, all the crushing stigma of judgment weighing her down, she poured out at the feet of Jesus with her tears. She shattered herself, exposing her emptiness, making herself completely vulnerable, in the hope that she might be freed from the burden and filled with the grace of forgiveness, so that she could live at peace in the abnormal Kingdom of God. And Jesus forgave her, not because of what she did, but because of who she was: a person of faith, open to the possibility of life renewed and ready to accept what Jesus offered.

When you feel exhausted, your energy spent, from the effort of holding it all together and keeping up appearances with a carefully crafted façade, so that other people will perceive you as normal, embrace the abnormality of faith and shatter yourself at the feet of Jesus. Let it all pour out, the resentment and the regret, in a torrent of catharsis, without shame, without regard for what other people might think or say. When you want to scream, "I can't do this anymore," "I can't take it anymore," go someplace secluded and scream it over and over again. Cry your eyes out until you shout, by the grace of God, "I won't do this anymore!" "I will not take it anymore!"

Jesus wants to put us back together again, but first we have to open ourselves like an alabaster jar. We have to break the seal that keeps in it all in. In the parlance of abnormal psychology, we need to have a breakdown, a holy shattering into pieces so that Jesus can

reassemble us into a vessel that can be filled with the power of his forgiveness, a forgiveness that we can then pour out for others and their healing. The majority of people will find this appallingly abnormal. So what? Who cares? We need God's acceptance, not theirs. Amen.