

“Scandal Avoidant No Longer”

July 18, 2021 @ the UMC of Geneva

Acts 5:29-33

ST. MATTHEW 27:50-56

If we dare to peer into the dark recesses of our hearts, we might find that we enjoy a good scandal ~ that is, unless it might involve us, or draw us in. In the 1970's we remember the Watergate SCANDAL. In the 1980's a deadly scandal unfolded when the prominent pastor of First UMC, Dallas Texas, was implicated in his first wife's murder.

Scandal is a Greek word prominent in the NT. It can mean a trap, or something that causes us to stumble, an obstacle, literally, or an obstacle to faith. Scandals can cause people to stumble, and to go astray. They set off consequences that last for decades. Many who saw the murder involving the Dallas pastor lost faith or at least wanted less to do with the church. Historians may look back at the Watergate scandal as contributing to mistrust in government today.

If you wonder why the message this morning is about scandal and not avoiding it, let's look to Scott Stevenson, who has asked us to re-hymnagine Nina Simone's rendition of "Nearer Blessed Lord." Born in 1933, Eunice Kathleen Waymon's mother was a Methodist minister and a housemaid. Her father was a pious man. Perhaps they protected her from the accounts of her enslaved ancestors. Perhaps in 1939 they turned their radio to a different channel so that Eunice's tender ears wouldn't pick up on Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit." An accomplished vocalist and keyboardist at age 12, she later studied for a summer at Julliard to prepare for the Music school of her choice, in Philadelphia. She applied and was denied entrance into the Curtis Institute of Music there. It was clear to anyone comparing her talent to that of those admitted, that her race had scandalized the admissions committee.

By the time Eunice recorded the song that our guest, Mary Lou O'Brien Fischer sang this morning she was singing and accompanying herself in night clubs. To protect her parents from the scandal of a daughter singing "the devil's music," as it was called, she took the name of Nina Simone. By this time she had listened to the elders, she knew things, so she changed one word in the chorus of Nearer Blessed Lord. Thy precious bleeding side of Jesus on the cross became thy ever bleeding side. For her and for many African Americans, whenever she heard of another lynching, and they were still happening in those days, learned of past brutalities or saw something unfold in real time, she looked to that last week in Jesus' life, when he, too, was brutalized in a scandalous and painful death. Along with other African Americans, from her deepest heart she knew the truth of the spiritual, "Nobody knows the trouble I've seen. Nobody knows but Jesus." In changing one two syllable word she reveals that Jesus still suffers because his loved ones, little ones such as Gianna Floyd, whose father died in Minneapolis, are suffering, too.

These days it's popular with some to ask others to get over it, put such things in the past such as slavery or residential reeducation camps for the children of America's first peoples or the internment camps of WWII. Some in our day are even voicing that to our Jewish friends and neighbors. Nina and Scott, Mary Lou and Dan (Dan Anderson accompanied Scott and Mary Lou on string bass) caution us, don't let the scandal of Jesus' death make you look away. It happened to Jesus. It's happening still.

Sharon read for us a portion of what the gospels tell us about Jesus' death, reminding us of how real, how awful it was. Many loved and followed him, experienced his healing touch, took their babies to him for a blessing, until he became a scandal. Overnight he became a wanted criminal. Within hours he was tried, convicted and sentenced to death

even though one of the very soldiers who hammered the nails testified for all generations to hear, “Truly this man was God’s Son.”

The one God sent to show us how to be true and real human beings now hung on a tree. Humans, and we might have been like that, too, could no more stand to see and hear his life-giving stories about who God really is, follow his example, than politicians in our day can stand even smatterings of truth. Wrongheaded theologies tell us the cross was God’s doing. It wasn’t. It was ours. The Bible says so. And when we did our worst, God did something we couldn’t imagine then, and yet are baffled by now. God raised Jesus from death to walk among us in forgiveness and strength. If this doesn’t all make sense to you, you are with many who ponder, as did Jesus’ mother, what these things all mean. His death and what people have made of it throughout the centuries since then is a scandal with which we need to be involved, with which we need to wrestle. When we’re tempted to unbundle it, to say “I want to follow the teachings of Jesus and that is all,” we fail to see the danger and power of living the Jesus life, renouncing violence as a solution and becoming brave like Peter. He surely was avoidant, claimed he never knew Jesus, but later see his courage at court! That can be us, too, when we refuse to avoid the scandal of the cross. Whatever scandals trail us, whatever sins we’ve committed or fears that are choking us, our risen Lord walks with us in forgiveness and a chance to begin again. With Jesus we can always start over.

We certainly want to avoid committing the kinds of sins that cause scandals. No one gets up in the morning thinking, I am going to cause a scandal. As we lay our heads down at night, we may find we’re involved in one. Others, too, are caught up in scandal, so what about jumping with Jesus, into, the scandals of our day?!

Decades ago when Rev. Al Patten was a DS he was invited to preach at Annual Conference. He told us about the gallows cart. In the days of frontier America when criminals were hanged in the town square, carted there from the local jail, sheriffs and others thought it would be good if a minister would ride in the gallows cart with the one condemned, to see if he wanted to get his heart right with the Lord and others before his hanging. Most pastors, due to the scandal surrounding the person and their crime, due to the optics as we might say today, would find excuses to avoid the scandal and the public spectacle. What Rev. Al revealed is that the Methodists always rode in the gallows cart. No matter the scandal, no matter the crime, one could count on the Methodist preacher to ride with the one condemned to death. Our forebears in the congregations so believed in the grace of Jesus that they told their preachers “Go ahead, ride in the gallows cart, and we’ll walk with you.”

Back to young Scott Foelske, he refused to be scandalized by Will’s fall into the mud and those who laughed at him. He refused to leave that seat right beside even when told to do so.

As people of faith, and faith in Jesus, we can’t avoid scandal. It seems when we’re done with one scandal another always awaits us. We can be the kind of Methodists who ride in the gallows cart. We can be like Scott Foelske, who refused to leave his friend’s side when he was embarrassed, ridiculed, scandalized on the playground. We can stay near, as Nina, Scott, Dan and Mary Lou encourage us to draw near to our blessed Lord and his Ever bleeding side. With our Risen Lord Jesus we can always start over, scandal avoidant no more!

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