

## CREATIVE CONTRITION

Do you see this woman? Do you *see* her? Most of the time the Gospel invites us to see Jesus: to receive new light and see Him in a way that leads into prayer, the gift of contemplation, and guided action. But here, Jesus invites us to see someone else. He takes a supportive role while this woman does most of the preaching and teaching in the form of creative contrition. She probably ended up being one of the women in the reading who provided for Him out of her own resources. Jesus is illuminating her as a model for what an initial experience of His presence and forgiveness can look like if we are prepared to receive it. I would like to invite you to imagine her story with me.

She had dark skin like Jesus. She grew up in the city. We will call her Susanna. Her parents died just when she reached the marriageable age. None of her relatives could afford to take her in, even though they found a way to get ahold of her inheritance. No man would marry her because her father was gone and she no longer had social standing. As a next-to-last resort, Susanna went to the Jewish priests and asked Simon in particular for help. Simon was young at the time. The best way he could help her was to marry her. She was attractive and joyful. Simon could take care of her. But he was really focused on his studies and duties as a young priest.

He wanted to marry someone that could advance his career, social standing, and reputation, and he had the opportunity to do so with another woman. He did not like to take risks and told Susanna that that is what she would be to him, even though in his heart he knew he could love her and that God loved the person who cared for the orphan. He had noticed how faithful she was growing up, and how compassionate she was to her parents from when they got sick until they died. But in the end, he did not make room in his life for her. If, as Simon, we do not make room in our lives for relationships with those who are oppressed, then we cannot claim to make room for what is close to the heart of God.

Susanna walked away from Simon's house the first time broken-hearted. Simon felt justified in his decision when later he heard that she had become a prostitute, failing to connect the dots that by his response he had driven her to do this to survive.

Years later both Simon and this woman began to hear stories about Jesus. Simon found Jesus interesting from a theological point of view. He had studied the scriptures diligently and found that Jesus' teaching added some diverse perspective to his understanding. So he invited Jesus over to recline beside his table and engage in eloquent conversation. He doubted that Jesus was a prophet and did not allow himself to consider Jesus to be anything more than that, but he wanted to test Him for himself. He was too curious.

Susanna, on the other hand, found within her a need for Jesus. He healed people like her. He touched people like her and let them touch Him. He ate and drank with people like her. Here was a Rabbi who seemed to care. She was financially stable now, but empty inside. On that night, as Jesus was on His way to Simon's house, she saw Him and the disciples with a small crowd. Another man had just paid for her services, and she had bought for herself some expensive perfumed ointment.

As she looked upon Jesus, she felt something begin to well up within her. She could not explain it in any other way than this: her soul began to rise. For the first time, all the shame and guilt, all those cutting glances on the street from the righteous, the way men refused to look her in the eyes when they slept with her – it all began to disintegrate. All the things men had said to her or failed to say to her over the years began to fall into the abyss.

The wax began to drip and her soul began to speak to her just by looking at Jesus; He had that much power. And suddenly, even though she was walking in the twilight, Jesus saw her too. And when He looked into her, out of His eyes came spiritual power, the power she needed to recall who she was in the eyes of God before everything had happened. Before the bondage, before her parents died, before Simon rejected her, before all those men chose to use her rather than help her – Jesus gave her a glimpse of who she really was underneath.

It was the first time since her father died that a man had looked at her with so much love, as though He could see her true identity without wanting to push it down out of fear of its power or take it for himself. Suddenly everything that she had done up to that point did not matter. Her sins did not control her anymore. The eyes of Christ lifted her above them for a moment. He had given her a taste of wholeness. Her guilt and shame were completely undone by His glance. In just a few seconds, Jesus had given her more than all

those men had ever stolen from her. A cloud lifted and she recognized Him in His true identity. From His eyes, she could tell that the stories about Him were true: He was more than a prophet.

She felt overcome by an incredible need to be near Him, and by the grieving awareness that a man with such power would not be allowed to physically live in this world for very much longer. She began to recognize her thirst and hunger for Him, and He began to feed her and give her living water. She held onto this water and food so intently that all her attachments fell away. She suddenly felt like she could no longer live without receiving all of Him into the core of who she was. She found that through His eyes had come an inner knowing which formed in her gratitude, consciousness of her sins, and a glimpse of the gems buried beneath them. But it was a different kind of consciousness of sin than she had before. It was not the kind the religious people made her feel about herself. Suddenly she knew that her many sins were not what she had expected. She was not sinful because she slept with other men to survive. Her sin was letting them obscure and cause her to forget who she was before her parents died – the identity God had given her. Her sin was having given up on believing in a way out.

She felt that through His eyes she had received a new pair of eyes with which to see her own need for forgiveness and liberation. Suddenly she did not care about anything else. She did not care that she did not look like the righteous reclining at a well-prepared meal. She knew that Jesus had given her an invitation to a heavenly banquet that went wherever He went, and the only attire required of her in the Kingdom of Heaven were the garments of salvation given through repentance.

She did not care about her history with Simon or that she was not invited. She entered his house before Jesus and did not speak a word to him or anyone else. She was not going to let anything or anyone keep her from Jesus. The closer she got to Him, the more she felt her soul rise. Everything started to shift inside, and all the pain began to pour out – all the pain she had caused herself, and all the pain others had caused her. Everything she permitted those men to take from her was repented of and received back. All her sins and the sins against her came into her consciousness. Jesus released every layer of grief she could not release on her own. She felt her mother and father carrying her to His feet. She did not hold a single wound back from Him. She trusted that He could handle it. The more she

wept, the more Jesus forgave her and healed her until there was not a single thing left in her to be forgiven and healed. She was whole. She was a new creation.

True repentance does not involve feeling a burden of shame or guilt for having done wrong. Repentance involves having all of your shame undone by Christ. It is an experience, not a feeling, and it happens when you fully allow the presence of God to overwhelm you with an encounter of the depths to which God has gone to reach and love and inspire you despite all the times and ways you did not allow Him.

To repent is to accept a new journey. To repent is to walk away from running away from God. To repent is to renounce the un-lived life. To repent is to hold onto the life God wants to co-create with and through you. Some let go quite easily. Some need a more dramatic cure, like this woman and me. Repentance can look like traveling across the country to confess your love to the one that got away. Repentance can look like finding the courage to leave a relationship that is no longer intended for you. Repentance can look like finding the courage to leave a career that is no longer your calling. For Susanna, repentance looked like washing Jesus' feet with her tears, drying them with her hair, and kissing them. Repentance was the beginning of the adventure on which her old self would fall away and her true self would arise.

The difference between the old self and the true self is not that the old self had sex and the true self does not. The difference is not that the old self ate meat and the true self does not, or that the old self drank beer and the true self does not. The old self and its practices are not rooted in externals. They are internal dispositions that affect how we perceive and experience the external things we do. There may be a period of time when we have to distance ourselves from the externals before the internals catch up enough to experience them appropriately. But the new self and its practices are in the internal dispositions and the energy one gives to others and to God through the externals.

Yes, there are some things where no matter how you do them, they are wrong. But most of what we do in our daily lives – eating, drinking, sleeping, lovemaking, listening, brushing our teeth, bathing, driving, speaking, writing, cleaning, cooking, washing – is not primarily sinful or holy per se. It is with what energy you send through every

action that makes it holy, rather than what you are doing in and of itself. You become holy not by what you do but by how you allow yourself to experience what you do. Your actions do not define you. What matters is where your actions are coming from and where you are letting them take you.

Looking at a handsome man or a beautiful woman is not necessarily sinful, and turning one's eyes away from him or her is not necessarily holy. What matters is what you allow yourself to see when you look at a person. Do you see a daughter or son of God, or do you see an object? Failing to acknowledge within yourself their beauty is just as sinful as looking at them lustfully.

It is not what Susanna does that makes her holy. What makes her so amazing is that she does for Jesus – with such passion behind it – what Simon does not do. Holiness usually lies not in whether or not you do something, but in whether or not you have permission or instructions from God to do something, and whether or not you invite Christ's presence into what you do.

Simon does not believe this. He believes that those who do not sin should not touch or be touched by those who sin, which means he believes that sin is able to corrupt more than love is able to redeem. Jesus knows that part of Susanna's restoration to wholeness – what she needs in order to be healed from all the traumatic touching other men have done to her – is an opportunity to express and experience healthy physical affection toward a man without having her fear of being hurt confirmed. Notice that Jesus does not touch her back. It is not because He is cold or disinterested. He knows that she needs Him to be physically passive for her experience of repentance and reclaiming her sexuality to be spiritually active.

Last week I said that we couldn't wash Jesus' feet. This week we see this woman wash Jesus' feet. What gives? Let me explain. We cannot wash Jesus' feet as He washes our feet. We cannot baptize Jesus with the baptism only He can give through the Spirit. There is only one way we can wash Jesus' feet. It is with the gift of our tears, the gift of our repentance.

Jesus also allows Susanna to wash His feet because this is the end of one of His journeys. The journey of keeping His identity a secret has come to an end. In His encounter with this woman, Jesus all but plainly reveals that He is more than a prophet: He is the Messiah.

He reveals this through His teaching. He claims that He has the power to forgive the debts of sin and their consequences. It seems that Jesus also has an understanding of karma, because within the teaching there is the assumption that normally, without repentance and His forgiveness, we remain responsible for sins.

In the Old Covenant and to a much greater extent in Eastern traditions (such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism), it is believed, though there are many nuances, that we reap what we sow, we get what we deserve, we have earned what we have, good or bad, and that our present inner and outer lives and their circumstances are the result of – caused by – our previous choices and all manner of development, from our present lifetimes as well as previous lifetimes.

They frequently cite Galatians 6:7 – *“Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for you reap what you sow”* – as proof that this was believed in the early church too. Only, taking this statement out of the context of the rest of the New Testament obscures what this truth implies within our tradition.

I do not deny that we reap what we sow. But part of what is alarmingly new about Jesus and Christianity’s understanding of His authority is the reality that if we sow a genuine, full-bodied experience of repentance like this woman, we reap eternal life and can experience heaven here now. By sowing repentance, we reap the forgiveness of and freedom from all our sins and their consequences, adoption as a child of God, an inheritance of spiritual wealth we did not earn, and a vocatio as one of our primary means of responding to such love. And even this repentance, though it is one of the highest states of consciousness, we have not attained on our own. It is a gift of the Father given to satisfy our desire for union with Him. *“For you know the generous act [grace] of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for our sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty we might become rich.”* (2 Corinthians 8:9) Repentance is participation in His poverty by which we become wealthy in another realm – the acknowledgment of our need for and debt to God, and the renunciation of the delusion that we are God, able to pay off karmic debt on our own.

I don’t mean to imply this is easy. It is not some magic formula of saying the right words, getting dunked in water, and *voila!* you get to choose whether or not you come back here. Stepping off the merry-go-round and letting Jesus break your cycle is a hard gift to receive.

The new life is demanding. But the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus as the Christ means that reincarnation is no longer necessary for those who are born of the Spirit. This is what the Good News means for certain Gentiles. And many of them consider it to be foolishness.

Jesus as “the Word made flesh” is strong evidence for belief in the transferability of karma or spiritual wealth to those who have none. “[God] has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.” (Colossians 1:13-14) Those born of the Spirit have been transferred from bondage to the law of moral cause and effect– of profit and debt– to the Kingdom and the Spirit of grace.

The transferability of karma or spiritual wealth is not only possible because of Jesus, it is necessary and part of our calling as Christians. When others sin against us and repent and we exercise our own power to forgive sins, which we receive at conversion and baptism, we transfer the boundless wealth of Christ to others.

Jesus is not one of several divine incarnations who come whenever we get so off track that we need to be shown how to liberate ourselves again. How many of those rose from the dead for you? Jesus is the Jewish Messiah, the only Teacher who ever said, “Come to me, all who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens and debts, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke fits you, and my burden is light.” (Matthew 11:28-30) This is indeed Good News for us.

It was Good News to Susanna, but it was bad news to Simon. In the Upanishads, a sacred text in Hinduism, it is said that one becomes good through good action and becomes evil through evil action. This is not to imply that Western Christianity has nothing to learn from the Eastern traditions, but Jesus shows us that the ones who have supposedly become evil through evil action love Him more when they have been forgiven, and the ones who have supposedly become good and enlightened through good action are the ones who end up hating Him and His followers in their hearts, have no need of a Savior, and end up doing something far worse than all the bad people put together ever did. They kill Him.

## Pastoral Prayer

Giver of Mystery, Forgiver of Sin –

Are we fully conscious of the power and authority we have received from you as Christians? Are we conscious of the enlightenment you have attained for us? Have our minds been clouded by the enemy who seeks to keep us thinking we are in the dark and that the Holy Spirit has left us, when in fact we have been transferred into the Kingdom of Light? Do you wish we were less apprehensive about claiming what you accomplished while you were here, in the face of so many who consider it foolishness? Lord, please give what is inside us outer expression. Please give us the gift of tears by the power of your Holy Spirit, that we may be healed. Please refine us in the burning fire in which your heart is aflame, and give us your rest. In your Name, you taught us how to pray, saying, *“Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for Thine is the Kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen.”*