

Shady Ladies and Risky Business

by Rev. Katie Miller

When I was a kid, I was fascinated with books and stories about that now-mythologized time in American History – the Old West.

It was a fascination that began innocently enough, with a pair of sisters in petticoats and pigtail braids, who traipsed around the countryside with their faithful dog Jack, getting into mischief and learning lessons, while bumping along in a covered wagon with their parents in search of their own Little House on the Prairie. In my head, I cast my older, much more responsible and intelligent sister Amanda as, of course, the sensible Mary, and myself as the younger, perhaps less well behaved and rambunctious, sister Laura, and with those images rattling around in my brain, I virtually adventured through pioneer life, the sort of exciting life that broke boundaries and stretched the limits of human imagination.

As I grew and learned and changed, so did my fascination, turning from the giant sun bonnets and broken wagon axels of pioneer days to seedier places like Deadwood, South Dakota, and Hole-in-the-Wall, Wyoming, and the OK corral. Stories of Wild Bill Hickock, yes and Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, though I personally preferred the sabbath-observing poker star, Poker Alice and the gender defying and buckskin-wearing Calamity Jane, the scandalous Belle Star and Little Sure Shot herself, Annie Oakley. Women whom the society at the time simultaneously looked down upon and immortalized. Women who entered this grand American mythology simply by unapologetically and unequivocally behaving badly.

When you gaze across the vast landscape of human history, there are many common themes, and one of the most glaring is that the women who most frequently made our history books were, in fact, the ones who behaved badly, women who made the decision to operate outside of the constricting boundaries set

for them by their society, women who thumbed their noses at the gender-based rules and norms set before them and decided instead to make their own. These women dared to establish their own set of boundaries, and in doing so, they worked their way into the history books that frequently deny women even existed at the time, let alone had an actual impact on the world around them.

In this regard, the Bible, our own scriptural history book, isn't much different. More often than not, the women mentioned in the Bible are the women of ill-repute. *Shady ladies*. The risk takers and the rule breakers, the give-em-hells and the ne'er-do-wells, the women who behaved badly and risked everything, women who were often condemned by the men around Jesus, but women whom Jesus himself called Beloved. Forgiven. Strong of conviction. Love and faith personified.

Last week, we heard one such story from the book of John— Jesus met a Samaritan woman at a well, a woman who absolutely should not have talked to Jesus in the first place, but she did. Extensively. And ultimately, this woman whom others may have declared sinful, Jesus declared worthy of Living Water.

Jesus had this little habit of willfully associating himself with people of the most questionable reputations, men and women, Samaritans and Gentiles, Pharisees and tax collectors and prostitutes alike. The woman in our story today is no exception. She's not given a name, nor do we really know her story – though we could, I suppose, make some assumptions about her given the strong reaction that her entirely inappropriate behavior receives from Simon, the Pharisee. We only really know for sure that she is considered the biggest sinner in town. Thousands of years of tradition have put her in the same camp as Mary Magdalene, who never once in the whole of the bible is called a prostitute but who has become one in two thousand years of Christian tradition. Still the judgment is passed, the sentence handed down, and this woman is declared unworthy. Unfit. The shadiest of shady ladies.

That is the assumption we are invited to make by Simon the Pharisee. But Jesus declines that invitation and does what Jesus does time and time again in the Bible. He bestows that shady lady with some sunlight. He looks beyond the weighty labels this woman has probably born every day of her life to find the human being underneath. He looks beyond the judgment handed down by the righteous ones in the room and dares to invite them to consider her in a new way. A way that takes in all the complexities of her life and experiences and values and celebrates every bit of it equally, granting her justice and freedom from those labels. And invites us to do the same.

This past fall, while writing my thesis, I came across the work of psychologist Ellen Langer. And it transformed my thesis and, ultimately, my own view of the divine. Langer's life work is that of what she calls mindfulness. Now if you went to First Forum this morning, that word should sound familiar, but she views it a bit differently. Langer places the things we do as humans and the way we behave towards the world into two categories: mindlessness and mindfulness.

Mindlessness first; it's what she calls "entrapment by category." relying entirely on set, existing categories to approach the world - masculine/feminine, old/young, success/failure, righteous/sinful, this/that with no room for anything in between. To be mindless is to be trapped in a very rigid world in which, "certain creatures always belong to the Emperor, Christianity is always good, certain people are forever untouchable, and doors are only doors." When we act from our own, singular perspective, there is no possibility of new understanding. And if we are only taking in new information about creation through that same perspective, the way that new information is received impacts the way we interact with the world later.

But **mindfulness** involves actively noticing new things, taking in what you learn there, and applying it to the way you encounter the world. Where mindlessness adheres to established old categories, mindfulness means establishing an ever changing number of new categories. Resisting the urge to immediately throw a new person or event or experience into the "Bad" or "good" pile and

giving breathing space for the complexities that make up human existence.

I latched on to this work for a few reasons: I was writing a theology of youth ministry, and I realized pretty quickly that this process is one that is way more natural to children than it is to adults. It's how they inherently see everything around them, as long as we get out of the way and resist the urge to impress our own boundaries onto them. Children learn about the world as they go, categorizing and re-categorizing everything they encounter in order to survive and adapt. When something or someone breaks from what they understand to be the ordinary, it's easy for them to create a new category and continue on their way. And in this way, compassion and empathy are innate because of these ridiculously active imaginations kids have, and their own constant restructuring of understanding. For young people, the world generally looks messy anyway. New things or discoveries are around every corner, and they simply require another re-ordering of understanding. So the world of children is, by its very nature, a world of mindful creativity and creation. And in this way, "true" becomes what "true" truly is: malleable. Inconsistent. A living, breathing, grey area.

Dont get me wrong: some of those categories are extremely helpful and necessary for children. Irons might be hot, knives are usually sharp, these categories keep our children safe and are generally helpful to know and understand. But when those categories involve living, breathing beings, with their own backstories and complex experiences, that's when categories can get a little dicey. Or downright dangerous.

Because as I thought about mindfulness vs. mindlessness, I realized that mindless thinking, acting from a lone perspective, is the root of much evil. Think about it. Or better yet, scroll through your facebook newsfeed, particularly if it looks like mine. horrific and increasingly common Mass shootings, like the one this morning in Orlando, can only really happen because of lone-perspective thinking. Same goes for Islamophobia, and lumping all Muslim people into the terrorist category. Terrorism in general is the

result of lone-perspective thinking. Rape culture, and stories like the one that has been dominating my personal Facebook as of late, a cultural reality which seeks to equate “woman” solely with “sex object.” Asking for it. Drunk. Promiscuous. Shady. And therefore unworthy.

Mindlessness is at every turn. Yes, in very small but also very big, terrifying ways. Luring us with the promise of easy decisions and selfish ambition.

And yet God calls us, too, to change and widen our scope a bit.

See, the second reason I latched onto this idea, so tightly that it still hasn't quite let me go: mindfulness is not necessarily intentionally sacred or divine... except that it totally is. God's creation is happening around us all the time. In little things and in big things. The world of God's creation is a world of perpetual newness. And it's complex and it's messy. And while Jesus was this complicated guy who said a lot of complicated stuff, he spent most of his time physically present on earth encouraging those around him to look at the world beyond what they immediately saw. Beyond the oppressive structures that fenced them in at every turn. Beyond the labels and boundaries they had been told were concrete and inescapable, and through to the infinite possibilities that came along with being God's creation.

It's this idea of mindfulness that is laid out in our reading today - Jesus is presenting to us two ways of being as represented by Simon the Pharisee and the shady lady. He doesn't belittle Simon or the woman because that's not his style. Rather, he invites Simon to see the woman. “Do you SEE this woman?” Truly see her. Past the labels and the boundaries that have been set upon her, to see her for all the complexities that she encompasses. Jesus is simply laying out the continuum of existence that these two very different humans represent, and thereby lays out the very framework of the complexity of humanity.

See I think we spend our days vacillating somewhere between Simon and Shady lady. There are

Simon days – days when it's easier to adhere to established rules and norms, days when we reach for the comfort that categories provide. Days when it's easier to pretend to be other than what we are, perhaps? Days when you're in, say, the middle of a particularly rough election cycle and judging from a lone understanding and declaring that judgment to be infallible is helpful to our own self preservation.

But then there are days when our perspectives widen – when something nudges us to widen the scope. When we refuse to let our lives and our worths be determined by others. When we love loudly and messily and unconditionally. When we banish artifice and blow raspberries at inauthenticity and live beyond those boundaries. Days when we cheerfully choose friendship over facebook battles.

Mindful, childlike days and mindless days and Simons and shady ladies and everything in between.

The understanding that Jesus seems to push us towards time and time again is simply that sometimes things aren't what they seem. And shady ladies aren't always that shady. And breakers of boundaries are to be commended. And that which has always been is not necessarily equal to that which is right. And what you see is not all that you get. And love is always limitless because so are we. When we move beyond those concrete, human structures of being that were set forth for us by society or our parents our grandparents or our politicians or our teachers, the work we are doing is sacred work. It is only through mindful, conscious action that true communities of mutuality can be formed.

Wholehearted communities that practice the risky business of radical, openended love. Because I am not simply one thing. I am many. We are a community of manies, and it is through truly living into that reality, embracing our own individual and yet communal many-ness, that we move a little bit closer to living out the kingdom of God.