

Choosing the Good News
Matthew 25:35–40; Luke 7:36–50
Sunday, March 1, 2026 (Lent 2)
Lenten Series: Tell Me Something Good

Let us pray: As we continue our journey to the cross and the tomb and the resurrection of Christ, speak to us a new word, Lord, that we might find new life with him. Amen.

Quick show of hands: how many of you have heard the story of Punch the monkey? Punch is a 7-month-old macaque, living in a zoo in Japan. He was rejected and abandoned by his mother after he was born. The zookeepers gave him a stuffed orangutan that he immediately bonded with. He took it everywhere. There were pictures and videos online of him sleeping with it or just holding its hand. When Punch was introduced to other macaques at the zoo, they were a little rough with him, pushing him down, dragging him around on the ground. It was all part of normal macaque socialization, but Punch didn't know that, because his mother never taught him normal macaque behavior. So it scared Punch. The other macaques would push him down or startle him, and he would immediately run off to his stuffed orangutan for comfort.

People all around the world saw these videos online and fell in love with Punch. The zookeepers got the stuffed orangutan from Ikea, and Ikea has been selling out of them all over the world. And then just the other day, a video came out of the other macaques including Punch in their grooming habits; a sign that he had been accepted into the group. People were ridiculously happy! Because even though this was just normal macaque social behavior – he wasn't being bullied or anything like that – people could identify with him. Because everyone has had the experience of being rejected, of not feeling like part of the group, and on a deep level that sometimes we're not even *aware* of, we all want to be loved and accepted. When we looked at Punch, we didn't just see a monkey; we saw *ourselves*.

Last week we started a new sermon series that will carry us through the season of Lent. Lent so often feels like a *somber* season, a season of repentance and self-denial, a season in which we reflect on what in our lives needs to *change* so that we can draw closer to God. It's not a "feel good" season. And what happens is that Lent can end up feeling like a season of *bad news*. But this season is actually building up to the greatest *good news* of all! Jesus Christ died for the forgiveness of our sin and rose from the dead so that we can live new lives with God and with each other, now and forever. Christ has conquered sin and death! That is *great news*! That is news that can *set us free* from guilt and fear and pain that we have been carrying around for far too long.

So this series is all about looking at the teachings and stories of Jesus and finding the *good news* in Lent. We started last week with the story of Jesus turning water into wine, and we talked about how that shows us that Jesus removes the barriers that keep us from being at one with God. Jesus takes the water of *ritual obligation* and turns it into the wine of *celebration*. And so there are not all these things we have to do to be good enough for God. We are loved and accepted and good enough for God *just the way we are*.

This week builds on that, as we look at this story of Jesus having his feet washed by a sinful woman at the house of a Pharisee. The Pharisees were Jewish religious leaders whose job was to help the people of Israel understand and follow God's law. They were seen as very righteous people. Jesus goes over to the house of one of the Pharisees, a man named Simon. As he is sitting at the table, a woman comes up from behind him and starts crying, washing his feet with her tears and drying them with her hair. She kisses his feet and rubs very costly perfumed ointment on them. Now, these are normal acts of hospitality that a host would show their guest: the washing of feet covered with dust from the roads after a day of traveling; an anointing of oil to give them relief from the heat of the day; a kiss of welcome. But this woman has taken it to the extreme, and she is causing a scene.

Simon the Pharisee says, “If he knew what kind of woman this was, he wouldn’t be letting her do this! She is a sinner!” We’re never told *what* her sin is, just that she is a sinner. Jesus *hears* Simon say this and tells him a story. Two people owe a man money. One of them owes 50 denarii (about two months’ worth of wages), and the other owes 500 denarii (about two *years*’ worth of wages). If we translated that into current American averages, it would be about \$10,000 and \$120,000. Neither of them could pay, so the man simply *cancel*s their debt. *Gone*. And Jesus asks Simon, “Which one do you think will love him more?” Simon says, “The one who *owed* more.” And Jesus says, “You’re right!”

But then Jesus turns it on him. “You see this woman? When I entered your house, you didn’t give me any water to clean my feet. You didn’t anoint my head with oil. You didn’t kiss me. You didn’t do any of the things you are *supposed* to do as a good host. She did. Yes, she is more of a sinner than you. But because her many sins are forgiven, she’s more grateful.”

This doesn’t exactly strike you as a “feel good” story. Maybe for *her*, but not for *him*. Where is the *good news* in this story? Well, if we use the story that Jesus told about the creditor and the two debtors to interpret the story of Simon and the sinful woman, the good news is that they are *both* forgiven. The good news for *us* is that we are *all* forgiven. We all owe a debt to God that we cannot possibly pay, and so God has *forgiven* it. Wiped it out. *Gone*. Whether our sins are many or few, we have *all* been forgiven in Christ. *That is good news!* But that was *last week’s* sermon, right? That we are all good enough, we are all loved and accepted by God just the way we are, sins and all. What makes this week different?

Well, like I said earlier, this week *builds* on last week. We start with the good news that we are all forgiven, loved and accepted by God. This week asks the question, “What do you *do* with that good news?” What *difference* will it make in your life? How do you show *gratitude* for the forgiveness that we have all received? Jesus *tells* us when he says, “Her sins, which were many, have been forgiven;

hence she has shown great love. The one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.” And by extension, the one who has been forgiven *greatly*, shows great love. We show our gratitude to God by loving others. Forgiving others. Caring for others. Welcoming others. Showing hospitality and kindness to others.

In our reading from Matthew, Jesus says, “I was hungry, and you gave me food. I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger, and you welcomed me. I was naked, and you gave me clothing. I was sick, and you took care of me. I was in prison, and you visited me.” And we say, “When, Lord? When did I do any of that for you?” And Jesus said, “Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

When we care for the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, the prisoner, all of whom were created *by* God, in the very *image* of God, and are members of Jesus’ family, we are caring for Jesus. When we care for the poor and the homeless, who were created *by* God, in the *image* of God, and are members of Jesus’ family, we are caring for Jesus. When we care for the addict, who was created *by* God, in the *image* of God, and is a member of Jesus’ family, we are caring for Jesus. When we care for our *enemy* or this person we are at odds with, who was created *by* God, in the *image* of God, and is a member of Jesus’ family, we are caring for Jesus. When we care for people with disabilities, who were created *by* God, in the *image* of God, and are members of Jesus’ family, we are caring for Jesus. When we care for the foreigner or the immigrant, documented or not, who was created *by* God, in the *image* of God, and is a member of Jesus’ family, we are caring for Jesus. And when we *do not* care for any of those, or we mistreat them and hurt them, or we neglect them and ignore them, or we mock them and make fun of them, or we blame them, we’re doing the same to Jesus.

We show our love for God in how we treat other people. But we cannot claim the forgiveness of Jesus Christ and then fail to forgive others. We cannot say that we love God and then neglect or mistreat others.

And *love*, as we have said so many times, is not just a *feeling* or an *emotion*, something that exists in our *hearts* or in our *heads*. Love is *action*. It is found in the things that we *do* and the *ways* that we care for others. We cannot say, “I love everyone,” and then *do* or *support* things that *hurt anyone*. Because the good news of Jesus Christ is that *all* are loved, *all* are forgiven, *all* are welcome, *all* are accepted, *all* are created by God in the image of God and are members of God’s family. And the good news is either good news for *everyone*, or it is not good news for *anyone*.

Think back to the story I told you at the beginning, about Punch the monkey. I said that the reason this story has touched so many people is because we have all experienced the pain of rejection, and we all want to be loved and accepted. When we look at Punch, we don’t just see a monkey; we see *ourselves*. We can *identify* with him. But we can *also* identify with the other monkeys who mistreat him, and with the zookeepers who try to comfort him.

When you look at this story of Jesus and the Pharisee and the sinful woman, who do you *identify* with? Do you identify with the woman who has been *judged* and *ignored* and *cast aside* and *hurt* and comes to Jesus seeking *something* (forgiveness, healing, love, acceptance)? Do you identify with Simon the Pharisee who wants to follow the rules and live the right way and do what is right and proper, and these other people, they just don’t fit in with that. And so maybe in the process of trying to do what we think is right or what is socially acceptable, we’ve ended up missing the bigger picture. Do you identify with Jesus, who loves both the woman *and* Simon and *welcomes* her and tries to get *him* to love *her*? Are you the one who is trying to *extend* love and acceptance and forgiveness and hospitality to others and bring them together and reconcile them? Who do *you* identify with?

And don’t be too quick to answer that question, because it’s not that simple. The powerful thing about this story is that we can see ourselves in *all* of them. Sometimes we are the woman who is in need of

forgiveness. And sometimes we are the Pharisee who judges. And sometimes we are Jesus who has to *extend* forgiveness. We are the one who *needs* welcome, *and* we are the one who *fails* to welcome, *and* we are the one who *welcomes*. We are the one who *needs* love, *and* we are the one who *fails* to love, *and* we are the one who *loves*. We can see ourselves in *all* of them. And the question we have to ask, in any given situation is, “Who am I being *right now*? And who do I *want* to be?”

Because the *good news* is, we get to *choose*. In any given moment of any given day, we get to choose how we will show our love for God and treat this other person. Just remember that no matter who they are, they are created *by* God, in the very *image* of God, and they are members of God’s family, just like *you*. So whatever you choose, whatever you *do*, you’re doing it to *Jesus*. That can be *bad* news, or it can be *really* good news. Amen.