

Love and Lent

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"I saw him in the parking lot with her. I think he wanted to get caught," my mom's hushed voice bleeds with betrayal. Unlike most gossip, this conversation doesn't have the quality of a listener, hungry for salacious trivialities. The whole house feels on edge, as I sit on the couch in an adjoining room, straining to hear.

I'm fifteen years old. I missed church that Sunday morning, but I'm catching up with what happened in the service through my mom's one-sided phone conversations. The instant mom hangs up the phone it rings again. She's in a t-shirt and shorts, walking back and forth with bare feet on the cork kitchen tile, reciting assorted facts and collecting others.

The bits and pieces come together. Our pastor had an affair and confessed it in his sermon. He stood up in front of the church and let the gathered members know that he had succumbed to temptation, but he was ready to just "move on."

The shocked congregation is not so ready to just move on. They want details. They demand to know exactly what had happened, how long, and with whom. The elders and the pastor schedule a meeting for that evening. As the sun goes down, my father leaves for the gathering of leaders.

My mother paces the kitchen a few more times. Instead of grabbing the phone again, she picks up a big basin and places our plushest guest towels inside of it. Then she yells out to the quiet house, "Car-ol! Let's go!"

The warm Florida night swells with the sound of crickets singing and waves crashing as we drive for about a half an hour, over a bridge, from the beach to the mainland, to our pastor's home. When we pull up to driveway, the house is dark. My determined mom still gathers the basin and towels and rings the doorbell.

I don't remember being let in. I just recall entering and seeing Margaret, our pastor's wife, sitting on a chair in her living room. She remains motionless in the dark room, in her beautiful home, staring at her lavish, white carpet, breathing deeply.

My mother takes the basin, walks into her friend's kitchen, and fills it with warm water. She carries it to Margaret's feet, taking off Margaret's shoes, she cradles her soles as if they are the most precious things in the world. Without a word, mom puts them in the water and washes them.

Margaret begins to cry and it doesn't take long before the tears smear all of our faces. Mom takes Margaret's feet out and dries them on the soft towels. Throughout the entire ritual, we don't talk, but we know what's being said. I even understand the depth of it, at my young age. Margaret is about to face some of the worst public betrayal, as people began to pick apart the indiscretions of her husband.

Privately, people make extremely difficult decisions to work through a spouse's unfaithfulness everyday. When it happens publicly, the betrayal magnifies. The most intimate facts of this affair would be drawn out for everyone. Margaret's character will even be questioned. And people will whisper about how *they* would *never* put up with such a thing. Some will even wonder if Margaret is the reason. Perhaps she was too frigid, and he had to find love elsewhere.

In the midst of the painful exposure, Margaret would sort out what she was going to do about her marriage. While hearing more details than she ever wanted to, she would have to evaluate everything in her life--her friends, the lies, her reputation, her pride, her children, and her financial situation.

Mom wanted Margaret to know one thing in the midst of it. Margaret would be cherished, even to the end of her toes.

My faith was formed that evening, not by the bitter betrayals, but in the love of the women. I think about that night each Lent, as we walk toward that treacherous path with Jesus. I recall how Mary took Jesus's feet, baptized them with her tears and perfume. She prepared Jesus for his death, not just with the costly ointments, but with the ritual that let him know that no matter what sort of trials he would face, he would do it realizing the love that soaked his skin.

Jesus said that whenever we spoke of the good news, we would do it in memory of her. So as I walk along this season, trudging the journey with the man of sorrows, I remember the reality of betrayal, but I tell the story with her memory. I think of all the times that the love had the ability to bathe toxic days and allow us to face injustice and cruelty.