

7 EPIPHANY  
FEBRUARY 18/19, 2017

FIRST, MARSHALL  
PASTOR SCOTT FULLER

PSALM 130; LUKE 7:36-50  
*The Spitfire Grill*

*Dear friends in Christ: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.*

*Prepare our hearts, Lord, to receive your Word. Silence in us any voice but your own, that in hearing we may believe, and in believing, we may obey your will revealed to us in Jesus Christ. Amen.*

A young woman sits at her cubicle, engaged in a lively phone conversation. She's extolling the beauty of the great state of Maine, with all its craggy granite hills, beautiful forests, clear lakes and clean rivers. Obviously, the woman is working in the state of Maine's tourism business... What's **not** obvious is that her work station...is actually inside the...state of Maine's penitentiary.

Percy Talbot, a stranger to Maine 5 years ago, was sent there to serve out sentence for manslaughter. Her background is a story of tragedy: a victim of sexual abuse, she became pregnant at an early age, and was beaten by her abuser to prevent her from giving birth. Ultimately, she managed to kill him as he was in the process of trying to kill her...and so she was sent to prison.

Very quickly, this refugee from another state fell in love with the beauty of Maine...at least, she fell in love with what she saw in the travel brochures, magazines and books. Still, it becomes the only place where she hopes to live, when she's done doing her time.



One town in particular captures her imagination – Gilead, a picturesque village nestled in the hills and surrounded by trees – it looks like a perfect place of peace, a serene space of sanctuary, a community of concord...again...according to the pictures Percy has seen.

Ironically, you and I know the name Gilead from the worship song that praises a **biblical** place of the same name. It was known for its soothing ointments for wounds, aches and pains. It also came to be known as that **spiritual** place – in Christ's presence – where our **souls** can be **soothed** and our **minds** can find **mending**.

Both of those things push Percy to find her way to Gilead when she's finally freed from prison, this town with the beautiful name that hints at the potential for hope and good news. But, as you may guess, the young woman soon learns that appearances can be deceiving.

The Sheriff introduces Percy to Hannah, the crusty owner of the Spitfire Grill, the only restaurant in town, then asks the elderly woman to give the girl a chance. Hannah's none too excited about the prospect, but she needs the help, so she hires Percy and gives her a place to stay.

Few of the townspeople see anything good coming from letting an ex-con live in their midst. In fact, they don't see much good at all – in **anything**. The granite quarry has stopped producing stone. Businesses have closed. Jobs have been lost. People have moved away – and none are moving in.

Even the one **church** in town has closed its doors – a painful symbol of how no one can see a future with any kind of hope...and what happens in such sad situations is that people let their anxieties determine how they behave toward each other.

So, it comes as no surprise, that with **Percy's** arrival, the rumors start to fly. Before long, people come to the restaurant – more to cast a mistrustful eye on this former felon than to enjoy the food and each other's company. Suspicion, depression, and fear are the order of the day...and condemning a confirmed sinner makes them all feel just a little bit better inside – at least they're not as bad as she is...

One of her most outspoken critics is a man by the name of Nahum. He's the nephew of Hannah: a moralistic man, who becomes righteously indignant that his aunt would let an ex-con work in her restaurant, let alone live in her house! It's almost as if he said to her: If you had your eyes open, you **would know who and what kind of woman this is** who's touching your life.

Interestingly enough, Nahum is also the name of an O.T. Prophet – one who also speaks a word of law and condemnation to those who are sinful. Here are the opening lines of his prophecy (Nahum 1:2-3a):

**<sup>2</sup> A jealous and avenging God is the Lord,  
the Lord is avenging and wrathful;  
the Lord takes vengeance on his adversaries  
and rages against his enemies.**

**<sup>3</sup> The Lord ... will by no means  
clear the guilty.**

You can see that Hannah's nephew comes by his righteous indignation naturally! Nahum tries his best to change Hannah's mind – but to no avail. When this stubborn matriarch has made a decision – that's that!

But, under Hannah's stern and watchful eye, Percy sticks it out, and before too long, she even becomes a valued employee. In fact, her presence at the Grill seems to be a godsend when the elderly Hannah falls and hurts her leg.

Suddenly Percy finds herself in charge of the whole restaurant, and it nearly overwhelms her. She has to learn how to cook. She has to learn how to serve. She has to learn how to interact with people to do what's needed – and when. But she also learns what it means to have a friend. Nahum's wife, Shelby, who, unlike her husband, is loving and kind, comes to help at the restaurant and together, they make it work well.

One strange and secret job that Percy inherits from Hannah is to fill a cloth bag with cans of food, and leave it out by the woodshed every evening. Nahum doesn't know about it. Shelby doesn't know about it. But with her bad leg, Hannah can't do it anymore.

The next morning, Percy finds the bag empty...and so it continues day after day. Finally, her curiosity gets the better of her – she can't let go of wondering who it is that comes to claim the food. So that night she decides to hide and catch a glimpse of this mysterious person.

Well, eventually a man emerges from the night's shadows...but when he senses Percy's presence, he turns and disappears...like a wisp of smoke. The girl runs after him, calling for him to stop...but to no avail. She apologizes for scaring him, she asks his name, she wonders if he wants some better food in his bag... That night, Percy decides to start adding treats to the sack, like a freshly baked loaf of bread, and so the exchange continues.



Hannah's health remains a problem, and it's soon clear that she'll have to sell the restaurant, a daunting task in a town that's drying up. Then one day she, Shelby and Percy come up with a plan that may just work. They decide to advertise a contest – in which each applicant must send in \$100.00 along with an essay explaining why they should be picked to become the new owners of the Spitfire Grill.

Well, the contest is a huge success: the women receive letters from all over the country, and manage to stuff a cloth bag full of \$100 bills which they keep in the restaurant safe...and as the Grill's fortunes start to grow, so the rest of the town's start to turn around.

People begin to let go of their hopelessness and, rather than be burdened by fear, they even start daring to wonder what good things might happen in life.

Whenever Percy has a free moment from work, she roams the hills around town – celebrating God's great gift of nature, and keeping an eye out for the man who collects the bag of food. She suspects that he's always close, so she carries on a one-sided conversation with the hidden man, sharing out-oud her thoughts and dreams. She even christens him with the name, "Johnny B."

Then one peaceful day, while sitting on the crest of a hill, looking out over the beautiful tree-covered Maine expanse of hills, Percy starts singing:

There is a balm in Gilead  
to make the wounded whole  
There is a balm in Gilead  
to heal the sin-sick soul  
There is a balm in Gilead  
to make the wounded whole  
There is a balm in Gilead  
to heal the sin-sick soul ...

And as she sits and sings, bit by bit we see approaching from behind her, the mountain man whom she has been seeking. Percy doesn't move, doesn't turn to look at the stranger, doesn't ask him any questions, or press him for answers – she just sings.

And as she sings, he reaches out to her – this man who's been fighting with every fiber of his being to avoid every kind of contact with every other person...he reaches out with his hand, and timidly, tentatively, tenderly...touches her head.

*There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole  
There is a balm in Gilead to heal the sin-sick soul*

It turns out that this mysterious mountain-man is no stranger at all...to Hannah... In fact, he is her very own son, a Viet Nam vet who returned from war so emotionally and spiritually broken, that he can only survive on the fringe of society, unable to find any way to re-establish even the most basic bonds of life – son to mother, neighbor to friend. The giving of a nightly bag of food was the closest Hannah could ever get to him.

But Percy's persistence in connecting with him, paired with her unquestioning acceptance of this wounded soul, slowly begin to ease the pain in his mind, and spirit and heart... And that gives him the strength to dare to reach out to Someone who may be able to restore him to life...

Now, you have to know that this is not a story with a Walt Disney *they-all-lived-happily-ever-after* ending.

The good news is that mother and son are eventually reunited, brought together, their family relationship finally allowed to start healing...yet it only happens because...Percy sacrifices her life to save Johnny B's.

One day the restaurant safe is opened, and it's immediately obvious that all the money from the essay contest is gone: over \$200,000 dollars has simply...disappeared.



Suspicion, as you would guess, falls on Percy... the ex-con, with the self-righteous Nahum leading the charge. But then things start to fall apart for this modern-day Pharisee. It turns out that Nahum *himself* was the one who removed the money from the safe...not to steal it, but to cast enough suspicion on Percy that she'd be forced to leave the community. He placed the cloth bag of money where he thought it would be safe – right where Johnny B's bag of food usually sits.

The evening of the “robbery” Percy, in a state of distress, had grabbed what she thought was the bag of food for Johnny B. and placed it out by the woodpile, as she did every night...except this bag was filled with \$100.00 bills.

One person sees her place a bag by the woodpile – no big deal. But another person hears that story, and assumes that she was giving the money to an accomplice: the mysterious mountain man whom nobody knows.



Now, if it's true that at the best of times we fear what-and-whom we do not know, it's even "truer" that such fear expands exponentially when a crime has been committed, especially a crime close-to-home.

Confident that they can capture the "outlaws" red-handed, a group of angry men from Gilead rush out into the hills, shotguns and rifles locked and loaded. Hearing that this posse, with a shoot-to-kill mentality, is hunting a stranger out in the hills, Percy rushes off to warn-and-protect her painfully fragile friend.

At that critical moment, Nahum, himself, has the mountain-man in his sights and is about to execute what he wants to believe is God's justice on those who are "guilty" ...

But then, suddenly, a cry of distress is heard. Percy fails in her attempt to get to Johnny B. before the posse does, but...she succeeds in saving his life, by...falling to her death.

That tragic moment...Percy's selfless act...saves an innocent life...not hers...but Johnny B.'s...Hannah's broken son... And, thanks be to God for her ultimate sacrifice, those two, heart-broken mother and spirit-broken son, are finally reunited...in love.



Days later, at Percy's funeral – in the recently re-opened church of Gilead – one person in particular answers the invitation to speak to the life of the young woman who had tragically died.

And surprise, surprise...it's Nahum who stands to speak. He says,

*I never knew.....Percy Talbott...I only thought I did.*

*I thought she was a stranger...who could bring no good to my aunt...  
to my family.....to this town.*

*And I thought I knew her so well...that I took that money out of the safe  
...to keep her from stealing it...I thought I knew her so well...*

*And more than anyone...I am responsible...for her death.*

*I thought I knew Percy Talbott...but I was wrong – as wrong can be.*

*I never knew Percy Talbott.*

Now I want you to imagine... Simon the Pharisee, lover of God's holy law, respectable citizen, moral icon, leader of the community...standing humbly before his fellow citizens, and confessing his sin of failing to know his neighbor...the woman in tears at Jesus' feet. Nahum had been certain that Percy could be nothing but devious, dishonest, deceitful...



Yet through the grace of God, he came to see her as she really was: a woman of integrity, devotion, and spiritual purity.

As it turns out, Nahum **did** know Percy Talbott...even as Jesus knew the woman of tears... The two were spiritual sisters...both of them sacrificial lambs who point us all to the amazing miracle, the fantastic phenomenon, the magnificent marvel of a sacrificial God.

It is Jesus Christ who seeks not the righteous but the wayward, not the greatest but the least, not the wealthy and the saved but the poor and the lost, not the high-and-mighty but the low-and-lowly...in other words...people just like you... and...just like me... In Jesus Christ, our sins, which are many, have been forgiven – thus we are called to show great love. Amen.