

# Steve's Cancer Story



**HE'LL REMOVE HIS FLAMING GARMENT, PLACE IT ON THE LOWEST HARLOT, AND WE WILL SEE HIS FACE!**

[JULY 31, 2019 BY STEVE NOBLETT](#)

Last Monday an old friend who lives in east Tennessee came to see me. We had a great time catching up over lunch, and then driving around our old neighborhoods. It has been 45 years since he lived in Memphis, so we drove by places that held memories for both of us. Finally, I drove him around where I live now. I pointed out my neighbors' homes and shared endearing stories about each one. I love my neighbors.

As we circled the block to head back to my office, we came upon a woman walking down the middle of the street. She is a familiar sight for those of us who live in my community. Tall, but bent; skeleton – thin, not in an attractive or healthy way. Her gait is awkward. Her hair – dyed jet-black, stringy, unkempt. She wore skin-tight black pants and a black long-sleeve t-shirt sort of thing that was dirty and stretched out of shape. She tripped along ungracefully in a cheap pair of spike-heeled “hooker” shoes. Her makeup was caked-on around lifeless eyes. She bore the telltale signs of a hard life that surely includes years of drugs and abuse. She was a walking tragedy, the kind of person you go out of your way to avoid.

As we got closer, my friend asked me if this was one of my neighbors. I told him that she was one of the prostitutes who live and work in my community. He looked both troubled and disgusted. He couldn't look at her for fear of making eye contact, and yet he couldn't look away.

*"Tempted?"* I asked. *"Who would be! What kind of man would pick her up?"* he replied.

Imagine what her life must be like. Imagine the kind of men that she subjects herself to everyday. Imagine the degrading horrors that she must endure just to make enough so her pimp would feed her some minimal fast-food ("unhappy meal"), and would give her enough drugs to numb her soul for one more day. Imagine how everyone must look at her, and what that must do to her own sense of self day in and day out.

My friend is a Lutheran pastor. Earlier at lunch we chatted about what each of us had preached the day before in our respective churches. He told me that what he preaches is determined by a liturgical calendar, and he lamented that Sunday was just one day off from a great day. Monday was St. Mary Magdalene Day, which rarely falls on a Sunday; but when it does it is one day he loves to preach. *"Oh yeah! You get to preach Easter all over again! It is awesome when it falls on a Sunday. Mary was the first person to visit the empty tomb. She was the first person to see the risen Christ! The first person to touch him. And she was the first evangelist – Jesus sent her to tell his disciples that the Lord had risen! It is fun to preach when St. Mary Magdalene Day falls on Sunday. But it rarely does."*

At the end of his visit, as he was about to leave I said, *"Happy St. Mary Magdalene Day"*.

It suddenly hit us both that most pictures we have seen of Mary Magdalene were of an attractive Palestinian woman with clean, long, well-brushed black hair. She was always wearing modest clothes, not quite as nice as Mary, the mother of Jesus, but clean and modest. In reality, Mary Magdalene probably looked a lot like the woman we saw earlier. (For my friends who may not be familiar, Mary Magdalene is an important figure in the story of Jesus. We don't know much about her except that Jesus cast 7 demons out of her, and it is supposed that she was a prostitute. She was among a handful of people who actually followed Jesus to the cross, and she was the first person to see him after he was raised from the dead.)

Imagine, God could have revealed the risen Christ to Nicodemus (a good religious leader), or to Joseph of Arimathea (a pious business man), or to one of his own disciples, or to his mother. But he chose a street woman. It was just daybreak, and she mistook him for a gardener until he called her by name. "Mary!" The first conversation that Jesus had after his resurrection was with a woman who more resembles my broken, tragic neighbor than me. She grabbed him, held onto him; and then she was given the honor to find and tell his disciples, "I have seen the Lord!"

What does that say about God? What does that say about my neighbor who sells herself over and over again every day. What does that say about *ME*?

I am drawn to a KING who values the most despised, most rejected person enough to seek her out to share what is arguably the most important moment in history. My neighbor is like Mary was. In Jesus, God became like Mary and my neighbor, too. Isaiah 53:3 says *"He was despised and rejected...a man of suffering and familiar with pain; like one from whom people hide their faces, he was despised and we held him in low esteem."* Jesus became like them. And if I am really honest, He became like me.

His love and value for her makes me look at my neighbor differently. I don't know what to do, how to approach her, what I might do to communicate His value for her broken life. I at least know how to pray for her. I know that since last Monday. I am ashamed to say I didn't know before that.

## WHAT DOES THIS HAVE TO DO WITH MY CANCER STORY?

The hardest thing for me – and this is a shameful confession – is that I am unable to do my job. I am unable to perform my ministry. I am used to being the shepherd. Right now all I am is a wounded sheep.

Honestly, my identity is too wrapped up in how others receive me. Most of the time they receive me with honor. They share their needs with me. They ask my advice. They are happy to see me. Now, I am a cancer patient. I am not shepherding. I am a wounded sheep. I am the one in need. I am the object of everyone else's ministry. God may heal me and restore me; or He might not. This may be the way I may go out – not some valuable contributor to the cause, but just another wounded sheep. (I am ashamed that I often think this way.)

But God honored Mary/my neighbor... in some ways, above even his own disciples. We never hear about Mary again in the Bible. Her value was never in her contribution to the cause. It was exclusively in her humble willingness to receive His grace into her broken life. Jesus knew her name, and He was not ashamed that He did. It is in the eternal record. I cannot think of a greater honor.

My friend pointed out that if we could strip away the woman in the street's outward appearance, and expose her broken and corrupted soul, it would be even worse than what we saw. She, in all her ugliness, was putting as good of a face on the reality of her life as she could. Don't we all. So the truth is that if I were to strip away my outward appearances – education and the externals by which people judge me, that I would be indistinguishable from her. In God's sight we are all the same. We might think there is a big difference, but there is not. I am broken and corrupted, and in need of God's redemptive love and forgiveness and grace. And she and I are equally loved and esteemed by Him, regardless of whether we are by others.

Every time I see my neighbor, I will think of Mary Magdalene; and I will remember how much the same I am to her, and how much God loves me and values me, even if all I am is a tumor farm, too weak to contribute like I once did.

What a winsome God we serve. If His kingdom is like He is, then may it come and keep coming!

Source: <https://www.stevescancerstory.com/blog/r5wf8l4h99lck0d13ak3x9ftlxvf7c>



**Steve Noblett**

Steve has been the Executive Director of [CCHF](#) since 2007. He has been involved in church planting and Christian leadership development in the U.S., the U.K., southern and central Africa, India, and Central America. In 1993 he founded City Builders Youth Organization, a youth-based Christian community development organization in urban Memphis. "There is no great field of need or opportunity than among the underserved. Christian healthcare to the poor is a major key in helping the church to break out of its bubble and reconnect the world with the message of Christ and His Kingdom." In addition to his work with CCHF, Steve and his wife, Victoria, continue to work with urban youth in a under-resourced area of Memphis. They have two grown daughters and a foster-son, all of whom love Jesus, and are committed to serving Christ by serving others.