

No matter who you are

John 8:2-11

March 18, 2007

The story is simple and stark, and its meaning is clear: *God did not send his Son into the world to be its judge, but to be its savior.* Jesus does not come among us to pass judgment on us, but to open a door to new life.

Jesus was seated in the Temple, teaching the people who had gathered there around him, when a group of Jewish officials entered the Temple. They brought with them a woman whom they stood up in front of everyone. "Teacher," they said to Jesus, "this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery." Caught in the very act? Talk about the sex police! "In our Law Moses commanded that such a woman must be stoned to death," they continued ... "Now, [Jesus], what do you say?"

First of all, I must point out that, for whatever reason, this group of Jewish officials did not quote the Law of Moses quite correctly. The Law of Moses states that in the case of adultery, both the man and the woman bear equal responsibility and must share equally in the punishment. Both are to be put to death. So if they, a man and a woman, were caught "in the very act," why did they bring to the Temple just the woman?

Just the woman indeed! If you are just a woman, or just a slave, or just a person of meager means, or just a member of the minority, you know why! You know by personal experience the long history of the unequal application of law, of the selective administration of justice, to serve the wants and needs and whims of the strong and the rich and the enfranchised at the expense of the weak and the poor and the disenfranchised. Where's the man? They leave him alone, untouched, excused. "Boys will be boys." But if a woman, if my woman, if my woman betrays me, then it's time to bring to bear the full force of the Law of Moses!

So they brought her to Jesus, but it's not really about her or about adultery, is it? They brought her to Jesus to trap him: "What do you say?"

If Jesus says, "Yes," agreeing that she should be stoned, he will have made a public statement in defiance of the Roman occupiers who reserved the right to capital punishment to themselves, and he will have disavowed his own message of forgiveness. But if Jesus says, "No," she should not be stoned, then he will have shown his disregard for the Law of Moses and shown himself to be a lawbreaker.

It's not really about her. She is just a pawn for these officials to use to try to discredit Jesus. I don't think they ever intended to stone her themselves -- they would not dare to defy Rome so openly! They just want to put Jesus on the spot. But using her, stoning her -- doesn't it amount to the same thing? She doesn't matter. She is nothing.

"So, Jesus, what do you say?"

At first, he said nothing. He just bent over and started to write on the ground with his finger. Why do you suppose Jesus did that and what do you suppose he was writing? That's the one mysterious element of this story, the one feature we will never be able to explain with any certainty.

We can say, at least, that he doesn't answer their question directly. For a time he ignores them and refuses to answer them, giving no credibility to their question or to their way of asking it. This is what I think his gesture meant: "It's not what I say or what you say that matters. What matters is what God says! What matters is listening ... to God!"

I think Jesus was writing out verses from Scripture on the ground, maybe something like these verses from the Psalms:

*Praise the Lord, my soul,
and do not forget how kind he is.
He forgives all my sins ...
The Lord is merciful and loving,
slow to become angry and full of constant love.
As far as the east is from the west,
so far does he remove our sins from us.
As a father is kind to his children,
so the Lord is kind to those who honor him.
He knows what we are made of;
he remembers that we are dust.*

Jesus finally looks up from his writing and says to the Jewish leaders: "Whichever one of you has committed no sin may throw the first stone at her." He avoids their trap, he doesn't answer their questions, he puts it back on them. He asks them to take responsibility for their defense of the Law, for their defense of the whole Law. He won't let them play games with the Law or with her life. And they leave. They all leave. Even the ones who were already there listening to Jesus when the Pharisees came in. They leave too!

Only she is left. What an ironic ending to this story! Only she, the accused one, the adulteress, is left standing in the Temple, left standing in that holy place, the place where God himself is thought to be present. She is not innocent of what she is accused, but she stands in the presence of God uncondemned. The ones who would have condemned her cannot, because they are not without sin, and the one who is without sin, the one who could have condemned her, will not. So there she stands, in the presence of God, given back her life, given back her voice, turned back by Jesus from pawn into person: "Go. Go back to your life, but do not sin again."

The story is simple and stark, and its meaning is clear. The difficulty comes when we must apply the story to our own lives and to our own situations, when their story becomes our story.

"No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here."

That's what we say, and if we intend to follow Jesus faithfully, that's what we must say! Jesus does not condemn. Jesus does not exclude. Jesus welcomes the accused adulteress and so must we.

But what if instead of lying with another man, she had been lying with another woman? Do you think Jesus would have handed out the first stone? Of course not! "No matter who you are ..."

What if it instead of an adulteress, the one brought before Jesus were a pedophile or a member of Al Qaeda? What if it were Rush Limbaugh or Pete Rose or Ted Haggard or Britney Spears or Bill Clinton? Then would Jesus have grabbed a stone?

What if it were you? "No matter who you are ..."

Jesus always begins with grace -- welcoming, acknowledging, affirming, not condemning -- and so must we. If we do not begin with grace, for everyone, for anyone, for each one, then we are no true followers of Jesus and we betray his message of the good news of forgiveness and reconciliation and new life.

"I do not condemn you," Jesus said. "Go, but do no sin again ..."

The purpose of grace is not to condone, but to transform: *God's kindness is meant to lead you to a change of heart.* She was not innocent. She was a sinner. Jesus refuses to condemn her, not to excuse her, but to free her for the possibility of a new life, for the possibility of a new way of life.

As followers of Jesus, we must take sin seriously. Sometimes we can confuse grace with indifference -- "It doesn't matter ... whatever you are, it's okay ... whatever you do, it's all the same ... no matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, I don't care ... I don't care" -- that's indifference!

As followers of Jesus, we understand that sin has to be a part of the discussion, not in order to pass judgment, but in order to defeat the enemy! Because sin is our enemy. Sin is the enemy of humanity. Sin is whatever it is that destroys life and destroys relationships and destroys beauty.

It is not always clear to us what is sin and what is not, which is why Jesus teaches us and shows us how to listen and how to obey. The critical virtue we must nurture in our hearts and minds is obedience, a virtue that runs contrary to our independent and self-absorbed natures. We live in a very narcissistic and self-indulgent age. We are taught and we believe that if it feels right, it must be right. We are taught and we believe that the first rule of morality, and perhaps the only rule of morality, is to be true to ... yourself!

But the first rule of morality according to Jesus is: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and mind and strength" and the second rule is: "Love your neighbor as you love yourself."

God is the source of life, and God is the source of the wisdom needed to live life well. God knows what we do not always or do not yet know. Living ethically, living morally, is not about what I want or about what comes naturally to me, but about discerning what it is that God wants, what it is that God calls me to do and to be. That's what Jesus said: it is in losing ourselves that we find life. Our lives are not our own. We belong to another. We belong to God. Now that's a radical concept in this day and age, but no more radical and no less radical than grace.

We begin always with grace, we take sin seriously, and we are honest about admitting who the sinners are. And who are the sinners? "No matter who you are!"

They all left. Jesus said, "Whoever one of you has committed no sin may throw the first stone at her," and they all left. They were honest! And I dare to hope that that was a life-changing moment, a life-transforming moment, a moment of healing, for some of them.

We are good, sometimes very good, at pointing out the sins of other people, but quick to ignore or excuse or overlook our own. But they are there. There is sin in you and in me, in all of us. When we admit our sin, Jesus does not condemn us, but sends us on our way, forgiven and empowered, to live a new life. But when we suppose we are without sin, or that our sins are of little consequence, we have already condemned ourselves.

This is what brings us close to the heart of God; this is what draws us close to each other: to know -- to know! -- that we all stand alike as sinners in the presence of God, none of us able to judge the other because we are all the same, all of us in need of the kindness and goodness and grace of God. No matter who we are or where we are on life's journey, God welcomes us here, to travel together the path that leads to new life.