

February 28, 2016



“Streams of Mercy: An Oasis of Mercy”

Sermon by Rev. Robert English

John 8:1-11

... while Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. Early in the morning he came again to the temple. All the people came to him and he sat down and began to teach them. The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery; and making her stand before all of them, they said to him, “Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?” They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, “Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground. When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders; and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. Jesus straightened up and said to her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” She said, “No one, sir.” And Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.”

This is the third Sunday of our Lenten journey, where we have been meditating on the nature of God’s mercy, in preparation for the fulfillment of that mercy yet to come on Easter morning. Today, we hear this story from John’s Gospel of a woman caught in adultery who is brought before Jesus. This is one of those stories which is familiar to folks inside and outside the church and contains one of those Jesus quotes which gets thrown around from time to time “let those who are without sin cast the first stone.” It is a story that is as challenging as it is comforting, as Jesus confronts and alters our conceptions of justice and offers a new way, a way of living grounded in his life-giving love and the rhythms of his unforced mercy.

So let’s take a few moments to pick apart the story to uncover its meaning for us during this holy season of Lent.

Jesus and his followers, at this point in the story, have made their way to the city of Jerusalem, where Jesus is coming to the temple to teach the crowds of people who gather there each day. The temple is the locus of religious thought, practice and religious authority for the world that Jesus inhabited. It was considered to be the holiest place on earth, a place where the boundary between heaven and earth was so thin that God could dwell most fully with humanity.

And so, Jesus is in this place, teaching the people about the kingdom of God when some religious leaders bring a woman before him who was caught in adultery. This is a confrontational moment where the religious authorities are challenging Jesus to make a public declaration about her fate, hoping he will slip up in some way and reveal some inadequacy. They say to Jesus, “this woman has been caught in adultery. The law says we are to stone her. What do you think we should do?”

It is a leading question. The religious leaders are trying to catch Jesus off guard. They are trying to trap him. They are exploiting this woman and her transgression for their own purpose, their own gain, their own agenda.

But Jesus knows their game. Jesus knows their concern is not with justice, but that they are only using this woman as a pawn.

Jesus’ response is so brilliant, confident and provocative. It’s something lost on us as modern readers; the text says he bends down and writes something on the ground. And all the while the religious leaders keep questioning him, keep badgering him to make some declaration.

This part in the story does not make a whole lot of sense to us, but it was an intentional and symbolic act to the religious leaders and those who were there to witness. It was a subversive act of non-participation. Jesus rising above the moment, embodying a non-anxious presence in the midst of this scene. You can feel the way in which this action slows down the entire process and shifts the tone from frantic and immature; to spirit filled and spirit led. In this Jesus transcends the situation and sees the whole interaction from a different place, through the lens of the divine, a spiritual perspective lost on the religious leaders who are desperately trying to assert their own will and ego into the situation.

Jesus sees the human element, he sees all the broken relationships, he sees the sum total of all the human imperfection reflected in this scene, and he sees each and every person for who they are, a beloved, flawed child of God.

Jesus sees the situation through the eyes of God’s unconditional mercy, through the lens of grace.

And when the timing was just right, Jesus straightened himself up, in the midst of the cacophony of competing voices and simply said “let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her,” and again he bends down as an act of grace-filled defiance.

It reads as one of those moments where the air is saturated with the truth of the Holy Spirit. A quiet moment which breaks into the hustle and bustle of our everyday life and lingers there begging further reflection and self-examination. It’s a moment of truth which has to really work on you for awhile before you start to grasp it entirely.

Jesus re-humanizes a dehumanizing situation. Jesus reframes this woman not as an adulteress or as a pawn or an object to be exploited in a political game, but recasts her as a human being, just like all of us, a human being who stands in need of God’s forgiveness and mercy.

Jesus reveals to us this part of the human ego which we would prefer to keep hidden, the part of our ego which says that we are somehow set a part as more righteous, more holy, more favored, or more beloved. The part of our human ego which seems to like a sibling buying for a parent’s affection by pointing out how much better they are than brother or sister.

With Jesus, sin is the great equalizer, our shadow side, our self turned inward, our imperfection, that which we do which is against love, for Jesus it is this part of the human condition which gives us great capacity for compassion, forgiveness, empathy, and mercy.

After this moment where Jesus drops some spiritual knowledge and goes back to writing in the dirt, the story says that one by one everyone left until it was only Jesus and the woman. He looks up at her and says "Woman where are they? Has no one condemned you?" She replied "No one sir." And he says "Neither do I condemn you, go your way and from now on do not sin." Jesus' response to the question posed by the religious authorities- "What do you say?"- is "Neither do I condemn you." It truly is an act of mercy, a verdict of mercy, which baffles us and challenges our notions of justice.

The woman in this story, according to the text, shows no apparent sign of repentance or remorse. There is no indication that she felt bad about her transgression.

And so in Jesus' final word on the matter he reveals to us this fundamental truth about God:

God's mercy always precedes repentance.

God's grace always precedes human action; God's favor and love are unconditional, unearned and unmerited.

Jesus reveals to us a picture of God's justice which is not punitive but restorative, not based on retribution but based on undeserved mercy. In this act of mercy Jesus restores this woman from exploited object to a beloved child of God, from being cast out of community, to drawn back into relationship, from condemned to forgiven.

This is a very challenging picture of God for some of us, including me, who grew up picturing God with this big book of Robert's life, keeping track of all the good and bad things that I did over the course of my life, and in the end if the good outweighed the bad then I finally got my reward; heaven, the pearly gate, bliss.

The God revealed here is a very different picture of the divine; this is a God of mercy, undeserved favor and forgiveness that comes before anything including having the words to ask for it, or recognizing our need of it.

This is the God Jesus reveals: a God who grants us all inexplicable mercy.

And, in our experience of God's undeserved mercy, we also receive an invitation from Jesus to 'go and sin no more,' to go and be transformed as you live in his way, the way of humble sacrificial-love, the way to abundant life.

When we experience mercy, God's grace to the undeserving, we are granted an opportunity for transformation.

A pastor relays a story of having failed the fourth grade. He was young for his grade, had a tough year at home and at points he couldn't quite keep up. When, near the end of the school year, he found out that he was failing, his teacher sent him to see the principal. I can imagine it was a cold feeling of failure as he made his way to the principal's office, recognizing his own limitations, each tiny disappointment along the way, which had now culminated in this moment. He sat down with the principal who explained the situation but then she paused, for a moment of silence, and after what seemed like a long time the principal said, 'I'm going to override your teacher because I believe you are more capable than what you are demonstrating.'

This pastor points back to this moment of mercy, undeserved grace, as a moment that forever changed the trajectory of his life. Without this act of mercy who can say where he would have ended up, if his life would have looked the same. He later found out from his mother that his teacher had called a meeting with his parents to explain how upset she was with the principal's actions. It just wasn't fair she said.

It just isn't fair. And that's the truth of it all, God's mercy isn't fair, and for us that's Good News. That's the Gospel: God's mercy is unconditional, unbelievable and unlimited in scope and scale.

So what can we take from this for our Lenten practice?

There's always time to pick up a new spiritual discipline even a few weeks into the season.

This coming week strive to be more merciful to those in your life, not just the people who are close to you, your friends, your family, your work associates, be merciful to all of those people because it's all well and good.

But this week, because it's Lent and we need a little sacrifice, be merciful to the people in your life who you think DON'T deserve it. Find a way to be merciful to them in thought, in word or in deed.

Be merciful to the homeless addict who you pass in your neighborhood or around your work, the one you see all the time even when you're trying to avoid them.

Be merciful to entitled drivers who think they always have the right of way no matter what, and remember God is merciful to you when you roll through a stop sign.

Be merciful to all the presidential candidates who you would never vote for in a million years, remember that they are human beings in a dehumanizing process.

Be merciful to your ex. Your ex-husband, wife, boyfriend, girlfriend, best friend or business partner. Own your part in the brokenness of your relationship, and let go of some of the resentment you've been holding onto all these weeks, months or years, you'll find some grace and peace.

Be merciful to yourself this week when you fall short, when you give into the temptation that's been plaguing you for years, when you make the same mistake you've made a thousand times before.

Be merciful to yourself when you realize that the longed for perfection you've sought within yourself will never appear. Be merciful to yourself when you sin, when you neglect God or forget to love those around you.

Remember Jesus' final word on the matter, neither do I condemn you, go and be transformed. Thanks be to God. Amen.