

January 15, 2012

The National Presbyterian Church

Sustaining Standards on a Slippery Slope

John 8:1-11; 2 Corinthians 5:17-21

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In our sermon this morning we continue a series in which we're looking together at the life of Jesus as we find it recorded for us in the gospel according to Saint John. John's gospel is one of four accounts of Jesus' ministry that we have in the pages of scripture and each of these accounts if you read them from beginning to end – (not many do!) – but if you read them from beginning to end at one sitting you will find that each of these accounts is like a portrait of Jesus painted by a different artist, each sharing a different aspect of Jesus' character and personality, because no one picture can encapsulate him all. In John's picture or portrait of Jesus, especially in the opening six chapters, he shares with us the fact that Jesus' life intersects with all kinds of people whose lives are blessed, whose lives are changed, whose lives are challenged by the presence of this man.

- Jesus meets with people who are from the country and from the city
- He meets with women, he meets with men
- he meets with the educated, he meets with the uneducated
- he meets with the powerful and he meets with those who wield no power at all

And the crowds begin to flock to Jesus. They begin to understand that whoever they are, he may have something for them.

The crowds begin to flock to Jesus. And most of them are happy with Jesus . . .but not everybody. In fact some people, as we found out last week in John Chapter 7, some people are mad with him. In fact they are so angry with him that they want to put him to death. So mad and angry that they want to put *this* Jesus to death, which at first seems really rather strange – he's such a nice man. He's such a wonderful teacher. He's such a blessing to so many people. So why in the world would some people want to put him to death?

Well, one reason is that they actually begin to listen to and hear what Jesus is saying! Not just about the world and not just about God, but about himself. Sometimes it's his explicit teaching, and sometimes it's his implicit teaching that is bothersome. That is, in Jesus' words there is a sense of authority that Jesus carries with him, the expression of a direct connection with God which is unique and authoritative. And His authority challenges and minimizes their authority. It begins to turn their world upside down. If he is the one with the connection of God, well, who are they?

So Jesus' presence begins to mess up their understanding of themselves and what they are supposed to be doing with their lives, and their place within the great scheme of

things. And so they begin to see Jesus not just as a nice man but as a threat. And in this they are right!

If we, too, do not in some sense see Jesus as a threat, we miss him. We miss the Jesus who lived on earth and who people chose to drive to his death. We have to ask ourselves if the Jesus I believe in is somebody who other people would want to crucify? If he's not, then perhaps he's not the Jesus who lived here on Earth. This Jesus who lived on earth was somebody who some people, at least, wanted to crucify, to get rid of. He came to mess up their lives.

And this is true for all of us. He wields that kind of authority. He wants to mess up our lives . . . but not to destroy us. No! But to heal us! To mess up our lives just as a surgeon messes up our lives . . .

So we have surgery, and life's not going to be the same. The doctor says that you can't do this, you can't do that. I think "I don't want it, I'm scared." But the purpose is not to destroy us, not to leave us messed up but to heal us. And the reality is that to get there you have to go through the first part first. And it can be painful and difficult and hard. But for healing to take place it may be essential. And spiritually, it certainly is essential: our lives must be messed up, turned upside-down before they can be healed and restored to the pattern for which we were created.

But those who wanted to put Jesus to death they couldn't get that far; they couldn't see their need for healing or that Jesus was the one through whom it would come. All they saw was that Jesus wanted to mess with their lives, and they decided that instead of allowing Jesus to do that they would silence him. They would try to get rid of him, push him out of their lives and out of life forever. So they pursued him all the way to death. And to do this they made plans. They had purposes: 'If we can put him to death and actually not get blamed for it, all the better.'

So they wanted Jesus to trip himself up – like some people want politicians to trip themselves up by saying something that can be used against them at some other time. And they began to ask Jesus questions which were almost impossible for Jesus to answer without getting into trouble with somebody – either with his Jewish friends, or with the crowds or with the Roman authorities who ruled the land at that time (those despicable, hated Romans who were in the land at that time!).

The kind of questions they would ask (and all the gospels bear witness to this line of attack), the kind of questions they ask are like this age old question: have you stopped beating your wife? You know that question? Ever been asked that question 'have you stopped beating your wife?' Well it doesn't matter what you say you're in trouble! Right? Say 'Yes' and you are admitting that you were doing it before. Say 'No' and you are admitting that you are still doing it! Either way, you lose! If you just answer it too quickly you're in trouble.

And they would ask Jesus this kind of a question. The most famous of which has to do with taxes. Is it right, is it legal to pay taxes to Caesar the dreaded Roman emperor? Well that puts Jesus right on the spot, doesn't it? If he says 'yes' he's caving in to the Romans; he's grown soft; he's going to disappoint his Jewish followers, his Jewish kinsmen. If he says 'no' the Romans can accuse him of sedition and fomenting rebellion. In the end in this case as you may well remember Jesus escapes by making that memorable statement: "render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's" (Mark 12:7);

which is to say, There are different spheres and we owe different things in different spheres. And so Jesus wiggles his way out of this particular problem!

Well our situation today in John's gospel is very similar to that kind of a situation – where Jesus is put on the spot quite intentionally in order to trip him up. A woman is brought to Jesus. This is not just a question. This is a real live situation. A woman is brought to Jesus who has been caught in the act of adultery. And her accusers ask Jesus to give an opinion about the punishment, whether or not the death penalty should be invoked – death by stoning as prescribed in the Law of Moses, the first five books of our Old Testament, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy as prescribed in the Law of Moses: *“What about death by stoning, Jesus? For it or against it? Not just in theory, but now, with this woman?”*

And the trick, the trap, in all of this is exactly the same as with paying taxes and these other questions – if Jesus answers either way, yes or no, the chances are he's going to be in trouble with someone. If he answers 'no, she should not be put to death,' he could be accused of soft-pedaling God's word: well it's there in the scripture isn't it Jesus? Scripture ordains the penalty! If he answers 'yes' then he's in trouble with the Roman authorities: they've taken away from the Jewish leaders the authority to exercise capital punishment. Only the Romans can put to death. So if Jesus says 'yes' and the crowd is incited, a mob is incited, to throw stones at this woman, Jesus could be accused of sedition. He could get into trouble no matter what he says!

So Jesus is in a bit of a pickle. He's caught here right in the middle of this situation and we need to ask ourselves. 'Well what does he do?' Sometimes we feel caught in the midst of a situation like that too . . . so what can we learn from Jesus? What does Jesus do?

Well he actually does what any wise person would do though sometimes we're not wise. I'm not wise; I don't do this as much as I ought!! . . . He kept his mouth shut. He played for time. He kept his mouth shut, he played for time. Spiritually at least he 'counted to ten' and waited . . . or, as the story says, he began to doodle in the ground and let time go by.

Listen to the story again.

Early in the morning Jesus came again to the temple. All the people came to him and he sat down and began to teach them [DR: So he's in the middle, he's sitting down, the crowd is around]. *The scribes and the Pharisees* [DR: the religious leaders – the Pharisees were sort of lay, renewal movement in Israel at the time] *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 woman. 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* [DR: the Greek might well be translated 'in' the ground.]

He was scribbling something in the ground. He was doodling! But what was he doodling?!!

Many hours have been spent trying to figure out exactly what it was that Jesus was doodling in the ground!

- Some people have suggested that he was doodling the names of the people who were accusing this woman – that somehow he knew their names or he knew their sins. Go back to John Chapter 4 and Jesus is with a Samaritan

woman. He sees straight through her. He knows exactly what's going on in her life and maybe he's exercising that same power in this situation.

- Others have suggested that he is writing down various verses of scripture before them, something like that.
- I tend to go with the late great New Testament Catholic scholar Raymond Brown who after examining all of these options says that he thinks well that Jesus was just doodling. That he was just, and scribbling something there in the ground and it was nothing in particular, that he was in fact quite literally playing for time . . . *playing for time, slowing it down. Taking time to, what? To pray? Yes! To marshal his thoughts? Yes! Perhaps to control his anger: to renew his love both for the woman and for those accusers. Effectively counting to ten and taking a deep breath.*

... Which is a very simple, but critical thing for all of us Christians to do at that moment when we feel as if we must respond in some way, and that first response is probably not the response that we will be proud of in a few minutes or a few days or a few years. But, everything in our society is pushing us in that direction. The bombardment of text and emails and phone calls. And I think perhaps even more than that, the loss of boundaries in our calendars. So that there is no time, in a sense, which is sacred. All time blends into all other time so there's no time where everybody just stops, just plain stops. And we have to, we must! The Sabbath day commandment (Exodus 20: 8-11) commands it. Not just for one day but at other times as well.

So Jesus here slows down the whole process. And in that slowing down no doubt he begins to see what we begin to see when we slow the process down in reading the scripture: maybe we read it quickly at first; then we read over a couple of times and then we linger with the scripture . . . and as we linger with this story we begin to see things that perhaps we don't see at first. Things that are there as well as things that are not there, surprisingly absent!

And that is in fact the most pertinent question to begin with as we look at this passage of scripture – to ask *what's* not there, or more precisely, *who* is not there. So *who* is it who's not there in this story? Who is the person who is absent in this story? Well surely it's the man who was caught in adultery. Right? So the woman's caught in adultery, 'in the very act of adultery,' and you have to have two to tango, so he was there, too? Right? BUT, then, he's not there. Not in the story, at least! He's gone. So what's going on here?

Well actually that's in a way the first clue that this is a test. That this is a pernicious, malicious test -- the man who must have been there at that moment is not there. That is, we, the readers, know it's a test because John tells us (8:6). But when you're in the situation, when you're there you don't have the benefit of hindsight. You're having to figure out all the circumstances of that moment right there and then. And in that figuring out this is surely one of the give-away points that the man is not there, but the woman is. So the absence of the man tells Jesus (of course, he might have guessed it before!) that this is a test, that this is a trap.

But it also tells us about the sickness and the depth of evil to which these people have descended. There's no man there but there is a woman there, and this is now not just a theoretical problem. There is a woman whom they are embarrassing, humiliating,

and are willing to have put to death(!) in order to make their point with Jesus; if the mob erupts at Jesus' response, she's gone!!

This is what they're willing to do in their desire to get at Jesus; to treat her as a non-person, not a human being at all.

And this as you think more about it, this they do all in the name of religion, all in the name of seeking to know 'what the Bible really says,' all in the name of 'Biblical faithfulness' – "*Jesus, we're just good honest folks. We just want to know what the Bible says. Please tell us what the Bible means at this point.*" And it's just a cover-up for what they don't want to change in their lives; a cover up for their lovelessness, their prejudice and their hate – their callousness.

So what Jesus no doubt realized as he doodled away in the ground, and what we realize as we take time to think about the passage of scripture to which they are referring, is that actually their interest in the Bible was *only in the parts of the Bible in which they were interested in*; that there are in fact other parts of the Bible that need to be brought to bear in a situation such as this.

Let me put it like this. There is no question that the Old Testament and in particular the books, the first five books of the Bible, the Law of Moses is harsh on adultery. From our point of view as Christians what we need to note is that actually Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount is pretty harsh on adultery (Matt. 5:27-30). He not only points to adultery as not pleasing in God's sight but to 'merely thinking about adultery' as not pleasing in God's sight. That's pretty harsh! And there is no question that the Law of Moses is also harsh on this point. But what is just as true and what's missing from the conversation is this: that it's equally harsh on the men as well as the women. So you open your Bible and you immediately flip to Leviticus 20 verse 10, and we read "*if a man commits adultery with a wife of his neighbor both the adulterer and the adulteress shall be put to death.*" That's the law. Both, not one. Both the man and the woman. Both are important.

But perhaps even more important it's not just what the Law says but what the rest of scripture says too, about adultery and punishment that must be kept in mind.

That is, do you remember one of the most famous stories in scripture, that everybody there in the temple that day would have been aware of, in which two people committed adultery and neither of them were put to death – so that the Law of Moses was not applied? You know this story? It's the story of King David and Bathsheba. And wait a minute: they commit adultery and they live! They live! And in David's case, the adultery even leads to murder! That is, the adultery is pernicious in the extreme. And David, David still lives. The scripture does not apply the judgment in that particular case.

So what I wonder is (back to doodling) Jesus writing in the ground? I'm giving in to the temptation to speculate! If Jesus was doodling and if, in fact, he was doodling something specific, writing words in the ground,

- maybe all he had to write was "David and Bathsheba"?
- Or maybe he just wrote "both people," or "adulterer AND adulteress"!
- Or maybe if he wanted to stick with the Law of Moses, he would find a verse in the Law of Moses in the book of Exodus that once again, like the story of David

and Bathsheba, everybody would know. Maybe Exodus 34, verse 6. *“The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.”* This is in the Law of Moses too! *“The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.”* This phrase was like a mantra in ancient Israel: a verse of scripture that is repeated directly eight times in scripture and indirectly in different variations at least 13 or 14 different ways in.

Well of course the answer is, after all of these speculations that I now have joined in with, that we still don't know what Jesus was doing as he was doodling!! But I think we do know that he was taking his time, working his way through this situation, this problem, so that when it comes time to open his mouth he knows exactly what he is going to say, and as in other situations, to avoid the trap, while still speaking Biblically to the situation at hand.

When that moment comes, what we see and hear is that he decides that amidst the various emphases of Scripture, in addressing the situation at hand, that he will choose mercy and redemption. Not to the exclusion of justice, but mercy and redemption as triumphing over justice, and incorporating justice within them. Mercy and redemption. Let me read from John 8, verse 7 in our story again:

When they kept on questioning him [DR: and those questions must have just kept on coming as he was down there. Come on Jesus, come on Jesus, let us know] 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.

[DR: You all, of course know what the word for ‘Elder’ is? Right? This is Presbyterianism 101, it’s ‘presbuteros!’ That is, ‘Presbyterian’ means ‘governed by elders’! So the scriptures actually read like this “when they heard it they went away one by one beginning with the Presbyterians” . . so I presume the Episcopalians were next, then the Methodists and Baptists . . . down the line.]

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.’

He does not condemn her, nor does he let her off the hook: “Go sin no more.” He names the sin and the sinfulness of her action! But he does not condemn, he does not let her off the hook and does not let the accusers off the hook either! There is a passion for justice here. But it’s in the context of mercy.

So Jesus sets this atmosphere, this overarching atmosphere of mercy within which people can know their sin and find God’s call to move more and more closely in God’s direction. Not because we have to, though we do. But because we want to. Every player in the scene experiences being humbled, being called into account and being set free to change their ways.

Just this past week a friend sent me an article which is really appropriate for this particular weekend (Martin Luther King, Jr). It tells a story that took place 90 years ago which shows for me, at least, exactly the same kind of approach, the importance of silence and of taking time, illustrating the power evidenced in Jesus’ action in John , Chapter 8. The story is told by Roland Hayes about an event in his own. Some of you

may know who he was. He was an African-American tenor, classical singer, whose career in the early 20th Century paved the way for many Black Americans who would take the stage as performers including Marion Anderson. He actually tells this story in a 1952 edition of Guideposts. (What I also found fascinating is that if you go to the archives of Time Magazine you can actually see a report in Time on this particular incident. The report in Time comes from 1924, September 1924 when the incident took place). This is what Roland Hayes writes. He says . . .

At that time the French were occupying the Rhine and were policing it with Negro troops from their African possessions. German indignation was running high. I was in Prague. The American Consul there received several letters protesting against my singing in Berlin, which was his next appointment. I was worried about the storm of protest. The Consul advised me not to go to Berlin but others suggested that my singing might do much to improve racial understanding in Germany. I decided to accept the challenge. On the night of my concert I took a closed taxicab with my Black accompanist to Beethoven Hall. The Hall was packed.

At the given hour I walked on the stage with my accompanist. At my appearance a barrage of hisses like arrows of hatred shot out of every corner of the hall. [DR: remember John 8: and the barrage of questions? 'Jesus, tell us what you think? Jesus, tell us what you think? Just like that barrage back then.] These angry missiles seemed to be aimed at my breast. It was a terrifying experience. I fought back the panic that threatened to engulf me. Then I remembered God. With hands clasped before me I stood there praying that Roland Hayes might be entirely blotted out of the picture, that the people sitting there might feel only the spirit of God flowing through melody and rhythm, that racial and national prejudices might be forgotten. When I do that sincerely the audience instinctively senses what is happening. But this was the hardest audience I'd ever faced. I stood there in the curve of the piano, my head up and my eyes closed letting the spirit do the work. The hissing continued. Two minutes, three, four, five, on into an interminable ten minutes the hissing continued. I stood in silence. Then slowly the noise began to die down. Without turning my head from the audience I told my accompanist to play Schubert's Thou Art My Peace. It begins softly in almost a whisper as the clear notes of the song floated over the audience it fell silent. Then I began to sing. When I finished they began to applaud, stamping their feet, their hatred forgotten. Never did I receive an ovation that meant more. The victory was no personal one. It was God's victory over prejudice and intolerance. God sang through me and won the audience. God sang through me and won the audience.

Isn't this what we want God to do through our lives today? Isn't this what God did through Jesus in that moment of silence? God, in a sense, sang through him so they heard another song; lifting people up above their worst behavior, not pushing people down. Restoring life not condemning to death.

This is not always easy. It is hard to stop and pull ourselves together in the moment.

- It takes courage. What courage on that stage! It takes courage to do that in the moment. To stop and gather our thoughts. To just doodle on the ground and pray.

- It takes remembering the authority of Jesus: his authority over our lives, and his example of what he wants us to do.
- It takes knowing and remembering scripture as a whole. Not just those passages that we like but others that we don't like, and pulling them altogether. This is hard work!
- It takes knowing our own weakness and our own humanity: remembering that we are part of the problem as well.
- It takes remembering Christ's unwavering love for us for we are that woman with whom God takes time and whom he wants to redeem. Remember those words from our first scripture reading (2 Corinthians 5:21) that expressed the depth of the love to which this Jesus whom they wanted to crucify, the depths of love to which he went for you and me?
*"For our sake God made him to be sin [DR: To **be** sin: to embody sin, to embrace sin, to take it all on him, to be sin who knew no sin] that in Him, by His grace, we might become the righteousness of God.*

May we know this love, and the calling to which Christ Jesus calls us this day, individually and as a community, now and always.

Let us pray.

Holy God we bow before You and pray that by Your spirit You would enter the dark places of our lives and that You would cast Your light into them. Help us to be no longer satisfied with them but to seek your surgeon's knife that we would be healed. Painful as it is that we would be healed in thought, word and deed. Amen.

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