

Grace Space III

John 8: 1 -11

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In the TS Eliot Poem, 4 Quartets, East Coker there is a scene that from a distance seems quaint and beautiful. Yet as we approach, it takes on another dimension.¹ Eliot writes...

“In that open field
If you do not come too close, if you do not come too close,
On a summer midnight, you can hear the music
Of the weak pipe and the little drum
And see them dancing around the bonfire
The association of man and woman
In daunsinge, signifying matrimonie—

Keeping the rhythm in their dancing
As in their living in the living seasons
The time of seasons and the constellations
The time of milking and the time of harvest
The time of the coupling of man and woman
And that of beasts. Feet rising and falling.
Eating and drinking. Dung and death.

As you come close, the idyllic scene turns into something much less delightful than a summer night flautist.

Our scripture today, seen from a distance, is a similarly idyllic scene with Jesus surrounded by a crowd wanting to learn. The setting is reminiscent of the Sermon on the Mount. Probably we all have at least one person we’d follow anywhere-- because we know from him, from her, we learn so very much. In our church survey the two primary interests of our congregation were fitness activities and learning. We are a people who love to learn!

¹ Gil Bailey in his Emmaeus Road lecture on “Why do we need the Incarnation?” led me both to the poem and this particular interpretation.

So probably, if we lived in Jesus day, we would have been right there with the people who followed Jesus into the synagogue whether or not we were Jewish. When Jesus spoke, we would have taken out our or parchment and ink. It would have been a lot more difficult in those days to do what we most like to do which is to take notes that we might have something to ponder, reflect on, even quote. But still, we would have been there, eager to listen and learn from a master of the spiritual world.

Teach us to pray, Jesus. Speak to us again of your being the vine and we being the branches. Tell us again the story of the Good Samaritan. Explain to us more of the scriptures. Please explain to us, what *is* Isaiah talking about?

Jesus begins to speak. The gathered people are drawn into his light. There is a connection of ideas, a dancing together of mind and life, and the fire lit in the heart. And, just as Jesus is getting to a quotable moment, enter in the Scribes and Pharisees with the half naked woman. And suddenly, we've come too close.

The time of the coupling of man and woman
And that of beasts.

Suddenly we are witnesses to that which we would rather not see.

Whether the woman caught in adultery is an image of what we hate or an image of ourselves or a bit of both, we think that we rather she stay outside the temple, outside the walls of ideas and our clean faith. But that's not what happens when you are with Jesus.

From a distance faith looks idyllic. It is a picture so beautiful that it is worthy of all the critics who say that Christianity is a crutch for the weak. Look at the majestic cathedrals built to the glory of God because of Jesus. Hear the transcendent music. Come watch the show; listen to the preacher who holds the attention of thousands.

Yet, as soon as you start to take your faith seriously, as soon as you take Jesus seriously, someone brings out a half naked woman and asks what is supposed to be done about her. You've come too close.

Feet rising and falling.
Eating and drinking. Dung and death.

The Scribes and Pharisees came too close to throwing the deadly stones. The woman came too close to being their sacrificial victim.

Jesus sees it all. Jesus sees the brokenness of the woman standing before him. Jesus sees the Scribes and Pharisees turning a child of God into a symbol of all that is wrong. Jesus sees their frustration and their desperation to fix what is broken.

Jesus came to the temple ready to teach. His mind is full of great stories. His heart is full of a desire to connect people to his Father's love. But in the temple, instead of singing, there is commotion and struggle. Instead of prayer there is an accusation and call for the verdict.

God has come too close.

There was a time when God tried to wash the world clean with rain and a mighty flood. There was a time when God asked Abraham to bring his son Isaac to the place of sacrifice, testing faith. There was a time when God told the prophets the land would be lost because of the people's sin.

What now?

What now when God looks upon unfaithful Israel and upon those holding the stones?

Do we dare come close? Do we dare come close to God?

We are not only interested in Jesus' parables and interpretation of the scripture; we want to know what God is going to do with us.

Jesus is God's answer.

To the woman caught in adultery, Jesus points to the space between them, the space of grace where she can hear God's true voice, calling her to him. There's no banishment from the promise, there's no falling from grace, there's only invitation, a place to dwell, a place to know God's love, a place from which she can find the strength to go out and not sin again. *Is there no one to condemn you? No one sir.*

To live a life beyond the death and dung of the dance around the bon fire, the coupling, the frenzy, we get there, Jesus shows, by daring to draw close to God.

But what about the Pharisees and Scribes, those who seek sacrifice to purify the temple, to make right the faith? What about our world gone awry? What about sin that is so deep and cruel that it leads to, not just the death of a person, but the deaths of a people?

Oh God, do you dare come close?

Jesus stands between the woman and the Pharisees. God's son, God's only son, stands between the woman and the Pharisees. Whoever is without sin.... And the beat driving the deadly dance stops...for a moment.

But we know the beat will begin again. We know the rhythm of Jesus' walk towards Jerusalem. The crowd will again be stirred up by Pharisees. The disciples will deny and betray and fall asleep. God's only son will climb one more mountain. God will lay him down on the altar of the cross. There will be no ram in the bushes to save him. There will be no flood to wipe away the enemies of God. There will be no punishment. "Father, forgive them, they know not what they are doing."

Animals of the field have no need of forgiveness or sacrifice. Nature's rhythm is enough for their dance. They've no power or desire to change it. But what about us? Elliot has us look closely.

Keeping the rhythm in their dancing
As in their living in the living seasons
The time of seasons and the constellations
The time of milking and the time of harvest
The time of the coupling of man and woman
And that of beasts. Feet rising and falling.
Eating and drinking. Dung and death.

Are we simply to dance to the beat of this world? Are we simply, like the seasons, coming and going, according to our time? Are we only about coupling, like that of beasts, unfettered by sacrificial love? Feet rising and falling. Eating and drinking. Dung and Death.

God of the universe tells of a great power. But God in Jesus is the one who stops the stoning. God of creation shows forth great beauty. But God in Jesus Christ finds the beauty where it has been hidden. God of order saves us from universal chaos, but God in Jesus saves us from the deathly beat of our foolish dance.

Yes, God dares to come close. God chooses to get involved. God chooses to change the rules.

Jesus is clear. The sacrifice is not for the unfaithful to make for the faithful, as in the suggestion of stoning the woman. It is the other way around. The sacrifice is made by the faithful for the unfaithful.

I'm drawn to the image at the end of "Slum Dog Millionaire." I hope to not give away too much but those who have seen it will have a definite image of sacrifice in mind. The movie is the story of two brothers and a girl. The older brother protects the younger. The younger brings the girl into their world. All through the movie the younger brother seeks after the love of his life, this girl, who had been taken with them into one of the gangs, but who, one day, was separated from them. The older brother is the fighter, the one who will get what he needs. He is the one who will do what it takes to make it in the violent gangs of Mumbai. That is ... until the final scene. In the final scene he sees love is possible. For a brief moment, he believes there's another way for his brother and the girl, even if not a way for him. The older brother's faith in his younger brother's love is more real than any of the money or power he holds in his hand. It is that faith of one who believes that leads him to sacrifice himself that his brother and the girl might live.

Trust me, he's no Jesus. But he exemplifies the power of the faithful.

That moment when we believe love is real. That moment when we believe God dares come close, indeed, we can touch that which is of God in this world. That moment when we dare believe we can stand between the woman and the stones that are aimed at her.

Come close; come closer. There's more than enough room for you and me to dwell together in the space of grace. There's more than enough need for us to stand in places where the stones are ready to fly. More than enough calling from God to create, in this world, the space of grace that people might know that he is real!

And remember, long ago, Paul wrote from prison, "The Lord is near." And in a burst of passion wrote "I can do all things in Christ who strengthens me."

That's what happens in our faith--when we come too close.