

Grace Space II

John 8: 1 – 11

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“Let the one without sin be the first to throw a stone” is a phrase used by Christian and non-Christian alike. The reminder that it is often not our place to judge reminds us that it is in our genes to judge. From the days of our youth we make judgments about what is right and wrong: we are right, the other is wrong.

The word “sin” is a word packed with Biblical history. Sin is that which keeps us from God. It is the thing that battles against the divine impulse within us, snuffing out God's light. It is that which keeps God's congregation from entering into the land, the grace space, God has carved out for them.

To understand how the space of grace is created for the people in the Bible, we first enter into a deadly landscape. In Joshua there is a captivating and sickening scene set within a narrative of conquest. I speak about it not for shock value but because if we are to understand the depth of grace, we need to understand the depth of sin. I promise that what is about to be read is not the last word--hang in with me.

Some of you might remember the story of Rahab told to the children last week. Rahab was a Caananite with great respect for Jahweh. She also was a prostitute. When Joshua's spies went to into the city of Jericho, it was Rahab who helped them escape. While everyone else is destroyed, Rahab is allowed to enter into the faith, the people of Israel. In contrast is Achan who is of the tribe of Israel. In one of the conquests he comes across golden goods, takes them, and hides them. This is an act of great unfaithfulness because God told them to take nothing. So Israel goes into

battle and loses. Joshua gets word: God is angry because one person in the community has done that which is wrong. One by one the families are brought before Joshua and he learns of Achan's deed. Achan and his family are brought out into the valley and are stoned. A place gets its name. Where the stones are set in a pile, this place will be called the valley of Achor, that is the valley of Trouble. In contrast to Rahab's faithfulness is the unfaithfulness of Achan, the one who was part of Israel, but had to be rooted out and killed because of his sin in order for Israel to move forward.

As one's faithfulness can bring a whole family into the people of God, so can the sin of one cause the whole family to die.

We understand, seldom does faithfulness or sin affect only the one who has acted. What troubles us is not the idea that sin affects the whole family, but the punishment--the way of rooting sin out--the stoning. It seems, somehow, sacrificial. And the fact that the family, even the children of the one who took the gold, are also stoned pushes it even further in that direction. This one family has to die so that the community may live, and may go forward with God.

Even though scholars suggest that both the Rahab and the Achan stories are folk tales, one has to ask what kind of people tell such stories? What kind of religion is being built here?

The answer is no easier than the question. The emerging faith takes sacrifice seriously. Sacrifice is a way to take away the sin of a people, allowing them a new beginning.

Sin has deep roots in the Bible. Those who go bandying about "Whoever is without sin..." usually have little knowledge of the Biblical concept of sin. Sin isn't simply about our getting it wrong. Sin is not something to deal with by simply turning the other cheek. Yes, there is that need for grace

space as I spoke of last week, but it is Jesus who creates it and we who enter into it are invited there by Jesus. Yes, sometimes the invitation comes through another who is acting as Jesus' disciple, but Jesus is the impulse of the invitation. The meaning of sin, then, is not just getting it wrong or missing the mark. Peel off another layer--sin is being driven by an impulse that is not of God and that impulse is sometimes so deep and tribal and cruel that it takes something beyond the scope of reason to set us free.

I know we hate that idea. I sure do. I don't like thinking about human beings, those God created in "his image," as being able to be so corrupted. How much easier to talk about Adam and Eve and the so called original sin, which surely looks small in comparison to all this. Who wouldn't want to eat from the tree of knowledge? Even the punishment seems livable, tilling the land and pain in child birth and not returning to paradise. We'll invent John Deere and epidurals and Disneyworld soon enough. Just send us out of the Garden...that's a fitting punishment. But if we read a little further sin follows us out and we run smack into Cain killing Abel. Sin leads to more than just the inability to return to paradise.

As we allow ourselves to look upon sin's malevolence, we see more clearly how, in our world, societal evil can take hold of a people. In many parts of the world, humanity is not just missing the mark--people are committing atrocities. If Jesus died for our sins, he better have died for the big ones and not just the times we miss the mark.

Our faith takes sin seriously. When you take sin seriously, as that which takes hold of a community, the Biblical way to break sin's hold is sacrifice.

Just as I don't like the idea that we are so corruptible, I also don't like the idea of sacrifice. I'm not asking that you like it or agree to it but simply understand that it is deeply embedded in the Biblical narrative and has everything to do with Jesus.

With sin and sacrifice in mind, we return to the scripture of last week, John 8: 2 ff: Jesus sat down in the temple and began to teach. 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.

Again, I remind you that this is a controversial scripture. But unlike the extracanonical texts, it is written in the same time as the gospels and is of a piece. Jesus is true to character. It is an iconic scene of grace. Not just for the woman...

Seen in light of the Joshua text, the Scribes and Pharisees, like Joshua, seek to root out that which keeps the people from fully entering into God's space of grace. In Joshua the grace space is the land. In Jesus' time, it is supposed to be the temple. There's a nice irony that a crowd follows Jesus into the temple, rather than him coming into a place that is already full of people. Something has gone wrong. The Pharisees and the Scribes understand at least that part of what Jesus has to say. Whatever it is, it is the duty of the Scribes and the Pharisees, those who are responsible for the faith of a people, to find it and root it out.

So they go into a home, catch a woman in another's bed, and bring her, half naked, into the temple. Okay, so I've filled in a few details from the phrase, "We caught her in the very act of committing adultery." I know

there are some of you who could write a more vivid story. Still, you get the idea. The Pharisees and Scribes intentionally seek out a symbol of what is wrong and bring it into the temple, to Jesus, and “making her stand before them all” ask him about the time honored way of dealing with sin, using Moses as their guide. “Moses commanded us to stone such a woman, now what do you say?” While they probably don’t yet have the stones in their hands, they might as well have.

It isn’t an accident that an unfaithful woman is brought into the temple that day rather than the man. One assumes the other could have been picked up at the same time. Again, knowledge of the Old Testament helps. There is a history of Israel being compared to an unfaithful woman pursuing idols, God punishing her, and then wooing her back. Hear the word from Hosea:

“Plead with your mother, plead—
 For she is not my wife,
 And I am not her husband—
That she put away her whoring from
 Her face,
And her adultery from between her
 Breasts.

....

I will punish her for the festival days
 Of the Baals,
When she offered incense to them
And decked herself with her ring and
 Jewelry,
And went after her lovers,
And forgot me, says the Lord.

Therefore, I will now allure her,
And bring her into the wilderness,

And speak tenderly to her.
From there I will give her
 Vineyards,
And make the Valley of Achor a
 Door of hope.
There she shall respond as in the days
 Of her youth,
As at the time when she came out
 Of the land of Egypt.

The unfaithful woman is Israel. The Valley of Achor, the place of Trouble, the place of the stoning. Scripture is always conversing with itself.

The Scribes and Pharisees bring the sin of Israel before Jesus, this woman its symbol: we sacrifice her that Israel might be made clean? Is this what you are calling us to, you who sit here in the temple and tell us that we have been unfaithful, that we have been wrong?

I think that the Pharisees and Scribes wanted to do more than just test Jesus. While the story is forced into that context in the gospel of John, we can imagine a different context for this story, perhaps more fitting to its original nature. A context which allows the interplay of Jesus and the Pharisees to hold more compassion than it usually does in our retelling. Maybe Jesus is ministering to the temple Scribes and Pharisees who have a real and true question: What is wrong, Jesus and what are we supposed to do about it? The law says we get rid of that which is like this woman...stone her...sacrifice her...and then we are made clean...and yet...

The lamb of God writes in the ground.

Jesus, answer us. We want to know why we are so far from the kingdom. Jesus tell us what is wrong. Why does religion feel so false? Why do our

sacrifices make us numb, bringing no peace? Why are the people left so wanting that they easily turn away to another?

When the question is real, Jesus has an answer.

“Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw the stone at her.”

Stop using her to close your eyes to what is inside you.

They are looking for what is wrong...we too look for what is wrong with our relationships and neighborhoods, schools and the workforce, our nation and our world.

Why are we so far from the kingdom? Tell us what is wrong? Why do our daily efforts, our sacrifices, no longer bring peace? Why are so many, in this life, left wanting?

For many today the church is the unfaithful woman. There are others, but this one is closest to home. The church is the one that has let people down, the one who is deserving of scorn. So people admit to being spiritual, but not religious; on a journey, but not Christian. The Soviet Union destroyed churches because they were, in their minds, corrupt. As long as we can point to the wrong there, we don't have to look too far inside. The idea that a church is a place to deepen one's journey of faith, the place where God acts, is sacrificed on the altar of wanting to be above the fray, wanting to have a higher ideal.

Stop using her to close your eyes to what is inside.

It is one of the greatest turning points in the Bible, when hearing “Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw the stone at her,” one by one, beginning with the elders, the Pharisees and Scribes go

their way.

I remember an elderly woman telling me a story about how she broke her hip. "It was that darned bug," she said, "I was trying to kill a bug and didn't stop to consider that I might not be able to move like I once could. I fell." I can still see her standing precariously on a chair, a woman well into her 80s, determined to get that pest. Her honest story and frustration with herself reminded me of how quickly our attention is taken away from that which keeps us safe and whole. A simple story allowed me to see things I need to confess...as I'm often standing tippy toe on some wacky idea trying to get that which bugs me to go away.

One by one the Pharisees and Scribes leave, each having a moment to look within and confess--what is wrong here may have a whole lot more to do with what I am trying to forget about myself than what it is the other has done.

Like the woman, the Pharisees and Scribes offer no apology. There are no tearful confessions. Yet, I think there is, for a moment, a silent corporate confession, a sign act, where one by one they take their turn in turning away. One by one they take their turn in saying "me too." One by one, they let go of the stone, that stone that in some significant way represents where sin has led them.

In the Blake pen and ink drawing, notice this...they wander into the same light that illuminates Jesus.

What stones are you holding? What is the symbol of your inner trouble, your Achor? You can find someone who agrees...that's what creates the crowd, you know...but given the choice...wouldn't you rather pause...reflect...and slowly at first, but with a gathering confidence, walk--into the light. For this...we now pray...