

“WALKING IN LOVE, PART 2: FOR GIVING GRACE”

John 8:2-11

March 13, 2022

Rev. Jerry Duggins

I love presents. I love giving them. I love getting them. The world in which presents are exchanged is a grace-filled world. I'm not talking about the world in which the giving of gifts is a matter of obligation or in accordance with the rules of etiquette. Purchasing Christmas presents for my five brothers when I was growing up entailed a good bit of anxiety before getting to the grace part of giving. The allowance and the little bit of money from jobs around the house never seemed to go very far. Making presents required more creativity and skill than I believed I had. So it always came down to “borrowing” money from mom (which of course was never paid back). In the end, after setting aside the envy at what the others received, opening presents Christmas morning was filled with grace, that sense of joy and harmony that often escapes the lives of six boys growing up together.

Forgotten on those mornings were the injuries from rough play, the angry words from injustices perceived, and the wrongs or hurts from callous remarks. We were not sentimental, so words of forgiveness were seldom spoken, but the love that we feel for each other suggests that forgiveness was a part of our experience. Forgiveness, however imperfectly practiced, brought grace into our lives. Forgiveness is one thing we do as we walk in love. It is a kind of giving that multiplies grace.

I wonder if the woman caught in adultery felt forgiven. Jesus doesn't use that word. The most that we can say for certain is that she experienced a reprieve and received a warning. She gets a second chance, which sounds like a moment of grace. But she never gets an opportunity to present her case. She never gets to comment on the inequity of charging her while the man involved is apparently let off. Jesus seems uninterested in the man, even failing to correct the Pharisees misrepresentation of the Moses' law, which includes the man under the punishment of stoning.

Throughout the story, Jesus says very little, seeming to ignore the crowd when the woman is brought before him. Without a word, he begins to write in the sand, while the Pharisees and Scribes badger him for an answer. Only after writing a while, does he utter the often repeated phrase, “Let the one who is without sin throw the first stone.”

Given the human tendency to justify oneself, it's surprising that no one remains to punish the woman. So surprising in fact that one manuscript offers an explanation by inserting that Jesus was writing the sins of the others in the sand. One imagines that they drift away one after another as they read their own human failing in the sand.

It does make for a better story. We assume that the crowd stood convicted by Jesus' words, but it's just as likely that they were never interested in stoning the woman. Roman law likely prohibited it. The woman is merely a tool to entrap Jesus. If he says stone her, he'll be arrested for starting a riot. If he says, let her go, he can be accused of speaking

against the Law of Moses. When he says neither, and tells them to look into their own hearts, they fade away, because Jesus has avoided the trap.

This deceptively simple story is decidedly more complex than we imagine. It is not just a story about a woman forgiven, the hypocrisy of the religious leaders, or the clever ability of Jesus to dodge the trap. It is also not a story about allowing the guilty to go free. It is not an invitation to excuse bad behavior because we are not perfect either.

Replace the woman found in adultery with Jeffrey Epstein, Bernie Madoff, Idi Amin, Adolf Hitler, or your own favorite example of a person repeatedly engaged in heinous crimes and the story sounds, well, just wrong. Unlike these people, the woman does not defend herself, does not suggest that her judges are no better than herself. It's Jesus who draws attention to this, and not to excuse the woman, but to expose the hypocrisy of her captors. It's not that Jesus approves of adultery, but that he disapproves of this manner of addressing it. We should expose acts of racism to the light, but not without acknowledging and addressing our participation in it. We should be part of the movement that draws attention to the many ways people abuse the earth, but not without being a part of the remedy that restores the earth.

Isolate one part of this story, and you can easily miss the point. I love this story because I see grace in every moment. I see grace in the humility of the woman who waits on Jesus' word for her. I see grace in the exposure of hypocrisy that not only avoids a lynching, but sends the people away with something to think about, something potentially life-changing. I see grace in Jesus waiting to interact with the woman until they are alone, and grace in his urging her to walk a different way.

And though the word is not used, I see grace in the offer of forgiveness at every turn. Some of the crowd walked away disappointed that their plan to trap Jesus had failed, Some walked away angry that the woman would escape punishment. But some also walked away reflecting on the state of their own soul. Some repented of their actions. Some chose to see others through gentler, more compassionate eyes than they had known before. We don't know if the woman was angry about this public exposure or humiliated by it. We don't know whether she feared for her life, or worried about the state of her soul. But in the end, she was a witness to a different kind of man than she'd possibly known before, a man who could see into her heart and judge her with the eyes of compassion. She got her life back, and given the courage to choose a better path.

And then there is Jesus, filled with the grace to speak just the right words, take just the right actions, that opened a door for everyone to walk in love. Forgiveness is as important a discipline or practice of Jesus' followers as prayer, reading your Bible, or attending church. Forgiveness brings grace into our lives, into our world. Forgiveness, at its root is for the giving of grace. We cannot walk in love without it.

I love presents. I love giving them and receiving them. The world in which gifts are given is a grace-filled world. Forgiveness is one gift, maybe the greatest gift that nurtures love and fills the world with grace. Amen.