

“WHAT THE WORLD NEEDS NOW IS ... MERCY”

Ephesians 2:1-10; John 8:1-11

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Most of you probably heard the news story a couple of weeks ago about the incident at the Cincinnati zoo. A young child climbed over a barrier and fell into the gorilla enclosure near one of the large animals, who picked the little boy up and dragged him around a bit; after a frightening ten minutes or so, the zoo's response team decided they had to shoot and kill the gorilla to get the child out safely. A scary situation, with a sad result – though not as sad as it might have been.

In the hours and days after, there was a vast outpouring of public sympathy for the gorilla. But not so much for the child's mother! She was labelled negligent, stupid, selfish, careless, and quite a few other unrepeatable things. Some thought her children should be taken away from her. Many people – *many* – expressed the opinion that the gorilla shouldn't have been killed, and that it would have served her right if her child died. Some people did point out that everyone has a moment of distraction now and then, and that a lot of four year olds are escape artists (I know this is true from personal experience!) who can get out of their parents' grasp in the blink of an eye, but for every person who thought this there were at least twice as many who asserted that *they NEVER*, even for one second, were less than 100 per cent vigilant in supervising their kids, and that anybody who could be shouldn't be allowed to have kids. There were few who considered whether she might have been ill, tired, dealing with an emergency phone call, tending another child, or just overwhelmed; nor was there sympathy for the terror she must have gone through during those minutes before she knew her son was ok. Hardly anyone said, "I'll reserve judgement because I don't know exactly what happened," much less, "It's not really necessary for me to make any judgement at all about this."

People seem to have an opinion about everything and everyone. Well, "we're all entitled to our opinion," right? Haven't we heard that, as long as and more times than we can count? But I wonder... is it really true? Or does it just seem true because we've been told it so often. I don't know. But the readiness to judge this mother in Cincinnati, the lack of compassion and empathy for her, really got to me. I mean, thousands and thousands of people who don't know her, weren't there, have no relevant expert knowledge, and didn't know exactly what happened were instantly prepared to comment on her parenting, intelligence, character, and culpability ... and to do so without mercy.

I feel quite sure these folks would have said similar things about me as a young parent. I can only be grateful that none of our not-quite-on-top-of-everything parental moments were so dramatic or so public. The story reminded me just how lacking in mercy our society so often is.

We judge when we don't really know. We aren't good anymore at giving people the benefit of the doubt. So often, there are no second chances.

If you didn't understand all the fine print, you're out of luck. If you can't keep up, expect to get left behind. If you can't be strong enough to stand up for yourself, maybe you deserve to get beaten up. If you don't fit in, you may find yourself left out, or pushed out. If you were in the wrong place at the wrong time, maybe you shouldn't be surprised to find trouble. If you are in any sort of public role, you ought to expect abuse. If you can't pay your bills, it must be because you didn't work hard enough. And if you've done something wrong, or illegal, or just foolish ... it will follow you forever.

A poorly chosen word or two can doom a political campaign. One misstep can lose you a job. Ex-offenders find that all doors to jobs and housing are closed to them. Rape victims are told that they should have been more careful. Millions of people are one health crisis or accident or car breakdown or home repair away from bankruptcy or homelessness ... and the accompanying shame. Students know they can't mess up even one class if they hope to get into the college of their dreams. And I haven't even mentioned the harsh judgment that is often dished out based on race or religion, because someone is poor, or because they are perceived as "enemy" or "different."

It's no wonder the level of anxiety is so high – in our workplaces, in our schools, in our homes, in social settings. We know that if something goes awry, we might not be able to expect any mercy.

Maybe the sense that we are living in tough, competitive, and threatening times has tended to squelched mercy. Maybe we have dealt so often with giant, faceless institutions who have rules and policies and fine print and bottom lines ... and no mercy. Maybe it has something to do with the fact that so many of our encounters now are not person-to-person, but online, or on the phone, or with news headlines ... rather than with people whose eyes we can look into. It's easy to judge from a distance.

Maybe judgement of others is a form of self-protection, a way to distance ourselves from weaknesses we don't want to be associated with. Maybe it's pent-up anger looking for an outlet. Maybe it's a misguided way of holding on to values and beliefs in the face of perceived threats. Maybe it's just self-righteousness

But it's awfully easy to be drawn in.

On the other hand, we have this strange and lovely story that shows us the mercy of Jesus.

The story of the accused woman fits kind of awkwardly into its place in John's gospel. If you go back read the end of chapter 7, then pick up at verse 12 of chapter 8, you'll realize that John's account flows on smoothly if you skip over this story. You may also find the story in brackets, as many Bibles have it, or occasionally, left out altogether. It may also have occurred to you that you haven't heard many sermons about it. The reason is that it's not original to John's gospel. Scholars are pretty much in agreement about that. The earliest manuscripts of the gospel don't have it. And there are some manuscripts of Luke's gospel in which it can be found. So in the world of Biblical scholarship, it's a little bit controversial, and for that reason sometimes doesn't get the attention it deserves. When and where and by whom it was first recorded, we don't know. But it's a story that is part of the early Jesus tradition - remembered, passed on, and written down. We have only to read it to understand

why somebody wanted to make sure it found a place in our scripture and was not forgotten. No other story calls us back to mercy quite like this one.

But to begin with, it makes us kind of angry, doesn't it? We see the cruelty and injustice, the public shame and the barbaric threat of punishment. And we see who is not there, too. Although she was supposedly "caught in the act," she seems to be the only one accused.... Has the man involved been let off the hook? – that sexist double-standard would not surprise us - or is it a trumped up charge? We don't have enough information to know whether this woman is guilty or not, but we can be certain that at the very least there is more to the story. We see she has no one to speak for her. We see how vulnerable she is.

We can also see from the beginning that the men who bring this woman into the temple are using her for their own ends. That the consequences to her will inevitably be dire doesn't seem to matter to them. Their hard line on morality, all their righteous indignation, their readiness to pronounce on what she deserves all emerge from their own agenda.

The religious leaders want to trick and trap Jesus into saying or doing something that will get him in trouble with the Roman government, or show him to be flouting Jewish teaching, or turn the people against him. It's evident that they aren't as concerned about the law as they claim, since there's no mention of the man involved, nor do they bring two witnesses, as was required. They have an agenda and they are more than willing to use this unfortunate woman to further it.

Jesus will not have any part of that.

I think it's interesting that he doesn't engage in any discussion about the accusation that is made. He doesn't ask questions, request evidence, debate the fine points of the law.

Instead, he does this really odd thing: he bends down and starts to write something on the ground, in the dirt. The storyteller doesn't say what. We'd like to know, wouldn't we? Over the years, a lot of people have speculated about it. Reminders to the angry scribes and Pharisees about their own indiscretions? Something about the grace and kindness of the God they were supposed to serve?

Maybe it wasn't the *content* of what he wrote as much as the action. Jesus simply refuses to engage in the game that uses this woman as a pawn in someone else's conflict. But it seems that what he wrote in the dirt somehow illumines the accusers' understanding of what he says next. When they keep questioning him, he says something that shifts their perspective dramatically... and that to the accused woman must have been astonishing and beautiful words: "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her."

With those words, he redirects attention from the woman who has been the target of judgement. He insists that each person pay attention to his own life, his own heart, his own motives, his own responsibility, his own sin. His challenge moves them, one by one, from the role of self-appointed judge to fellow sinner. On some level, it doesn't matter whether or not the woman is guilty as charged or what her accusers may themselves have done. Everyone is in the same boat – in need of mercy. Until we see ourselves there, we will perpetuate the way of judgement without mercy.

We should be careful not to read into this a dismissal of sin that Jesus doesn't intend. When Jesus says that the one without sin should cast the first stone, when he says, as he does in both Luke and Matthew, that we should "not judge," (Luke 6:37, Matthew 7:1) he is not saying that we not use good judgement. He is not telling us that we don't need to concern ourselves with discerning the difference between right and wrong, or that we shouldn't speak and act against injustice and dishonestly and cruelty and greed. He isn't excusing, or suggesting that we have no accountability or that sin is without consequences. He isn't prescribing criminal justice policy. This is about how God's people are supposed to be in the world.

"Let anyone without sin throw the first stone" doesn't mean that since we all sin, sin is no big deal. You will have noticed that the story ends with him saying, "Go and sin no more." Jesus is simply asking us not to forget that we, too, have needed mercy. What if we remembered that every time we start have something to say about someone else? The mercy of God, and our mutual, universal need of that mercy – these two truths show us where we may begin to put down the stones.

Rev. Nancy Taylor writes in response to this story: "The world eggs us on to judge others. It expects it of us." I think we can look around us, *listen* around us, and know this is true. We can also see how destructive it is, how it feeds fear and division, how it harms people instead of helping them. Taylor goes on to say, "The way of the Christian is different." It is "countercultural and counterintuitive," and therefore it must be learned. (p. 250)

We learn it from Jesus. We learn it from this story in which mercy releases everyone – the woman's accusers from their self-righteous willingness to hurt, and the woman from the storm of abuse and accusation swirling around her. I don't know if you noticed that in the course of the story Jesus bends down to write, then straightens up to speak to the religious leaders, bends down again to write, the straightens up to speak to the woman. He addresses them in the same way, with the same respect, and in the end, the same challenge: to live faithfully in response to God's mercy.

We would like to have more of the story – what changed in these folks' lives? We don't know; we only know that who they were and what they did in the past matters less than the new future Jesus opens for them.

Nancy Taylor writes, "While we are constantly invited into and tempted by the world's propensity for dividing humans into us and them – good guys and bad guys, the guilty and the guilt-free, saints and sinners – in truth we are each a little of both. In truth, our life's work as followers of Jesus is in learning and practicing gentleness, discipline, humility, and forbearance. Our life's work is in shaping our own lives as disciples, not judging others' lives." (p.252)

This story is good news for the woman accused of adultery, for her self-righteous and judgmental accusers, for me, for you, for a world caught up in judgment and anger, for everyone who needs a little bit of mercy. We need this story; we need this mercy. And the world needs to see this story, this mercy, reflected in our lives and words. Amen.

Resources:

"John 7:53-8:11", Pastoral Perspective" by Nancy S. Taylor, in *Feasting on the Gospels: John, volume 1*