

July 9, 2017

*“Woman, Where are Your Accusers?”*

John Wesley United Methodist Church

John 8:1-12

Rev. Rebecca Mincieli, 508-548-3050

This summer, I'm going to be offering a series of sermons on some of the questions Jesus asked in the Bible. And I think you'll find them very interesting and provocative. Just to whet your appetite, Jesus asked a total of 307 questions. It was one of his primary methods of teaching – getting people to think and reflect on the question, and, as a result, hopefully, draw closer to God. Now in turn, Jesus was asked a total of 183 questions. And of those, he only directly answered eight. So let's get started.

In today's Scripture, the Pharisees come to Jesus with a woman who was caught in the act of adultery. A very serious accusation. There's some back and forth between Jesus and the Pharisees, but at the end, Jesus asks the adulteress the question, "Woman, where are your accusers? Woman, where are your accusers? Has no one condemned you?" "No one, sir," comes the reply. "Then neither do I condemn you. Go on your way, and from now on, sin no more."

What a powerful story of God's compassion and forgiveness! There is no one to accuse her, not even Jesus. And I hope we're all moved by what this act of love means for us as well. For we can identify with this woman in some ways, can't we? Because here is a person who has sinned. Here is a person who has made a mistake. Here is a person who is frightened. Here is a person who feels shame. Here is a person who needs mercy... here is a person just like us. And Jesus pours out his grace upon her and offers her forgiveness, and gives her a second chance and a new life. And as she walks away, filled with that grace, can't you just imagine Jesus watching her, nodding his head, smiling, then, as St. John writes, telling the people in the crowd, "I am the light of the world and whoever follows me will never walk in darkness (again)." And the good news is, that same promise, "whoever follows me, will never walk in darkness again," is meant just as much for you and me.

You know, it's really fascinating why this woman was brought before Jesus in the first place. You see, those accusing her, the authorities, were not really concerned about her sin. Instead, they had ulterior motives. Their real intention was to get at Jesus. Because you see, Jesus preached a new theology. He preached a gospel of love, a gospel grounded in compassion, forgiveness, mercy and understanding, rather than based on just the letter of the law. For Jesus, it was more important that somebody be given a second chance, given an opportunity to repent, to change, to sin no more, rather than using stoning to

death as the means of changing one's behavior. So the authorities bring this woman to Jesus in order to force him to a test regarding the law. For that law states specifically in Leviticus, "If a man commits adultery with the wife of his neighbor, both the adulterer and the adulteress, shall be stoned to death." So if Jesus agreed to stone her, he would be contradicting himself, and his gospel of compassion, forgiveness and mercy. But, if he let her go, he would contradict the law, and thus lose his standing as a rabbi, a teacher, and they would be able to bring charges against him and get rid of him. Obviously, this was a high stakes confrontation! Now one of the mysteries of this story occurs immediately after the authorities bring the woman to Jesus and ask him, "In the law, Moses commands us to stone such women... what do you say, Jesus?" "What do you say?" But Jesus doesn't answer. Instead he stoops down and begins to write with his finger on the ground. What does he write? No one knows, though it's been the subject of much speculation over the past two thousand years. Perhaps he was writing nothing, just buying some time to think. We've all done that – had a piece of paper and a pen or pencil in our hand, and we begin to doodle, as we think about some important issue or decision. Or perhaps he was exasperated at being tested by the authorities, and drawing in the dust was like counting to ten before saying anything. Or perhaps he was permitting the accusers to settle into their smugness, knowing he would soon have them walking away in humiliation. Like I said, no one knows. I personally like to think that Jesus was praying, talking to God about the perfect resolution of this problem facing him. A practice we should all adhere to. Whatever it was, Jesus then stands up. The woman is clearly guilty. The crowd waits in watchful anticipation. What will he do, what will he say? Finally Jesus speaks, "Let anyone among you who is without sin throw the first stone." "Let anyone among you who is without sin, throw the first stone." You can imagine the gasp, the surprise, the marvel at such divine wisdom. And one by one, the accusers drop their stones and walk away. Then Jesus asks the question, "Woman, where are your accusers? Has no one condemned you?" "No one, sir," comes the reply. "Then neither do I condemn you. Go on your way, and from now on, sin no more."

I think we need to take away from this scripture two important lessons. The first one is very basic and has to do with the fact that we all have to make choices and decisions, each and every day of our lives. And those choices all have consequences. This woman obviously made a choice to be in a relationship she shouldn't have been in, and you can imagine the consequences – broken home, broken family, broken hearts. And it's true for us as well – a bad decision can adversely affect our families, our health, our well-being and our future. Therefore the choices and decisions we make, especially if we call ourselves Christians, have to be well grounded in what is true and right and godly. They cannot be

choices and decisions based on the values of a culture gone awry or the on the mores of a society gone astray. I want to share an article by Pulitzer prize winner Peggy Noonan that speaks to this. She writes, "I was at a graduation ceremony at a public high school in New Jersey. One by one a stream of black robed students walked across the stage and received their diplomas. A pretty girl with red hair, very big under her graduation gown, walked up to receive her diploma. The entire auditorium stood and applauded. I looked at my sister, who sat beside me. 'She's going to have a baby,' she explained. The girl was eight months pregnant and had the courage to go through with her pregnancy and take her finals and finish school despite society's disapproval. But society wasn't disapproving. It was applauding. Applause is the right and generous response for a young girl with grit and heart and determination. And yet, at the sound of that applause, I heard a wall fall, a (six) thousand year old wall, a wall of restrictions that say, 'we as a society don't condone teenage unwed motherhood because it is not good for us, not good for the mother, and especially not good for the child.'" Because statistics show that children of single parents are more likely to grow up and live in poverty, more likely to be uneducated, and more likely to lead unhealthy and unproductive lives. And I'm sure some of us here know a young girl in that situation and we are grateful that today's scripture shows that Jesus can help us move forward. But the truth is, the choices and decisions we make can have far-reaching effects, not only for us, but for others too. That's why our daily decisions have to be grounded in Christian principles and ethics.

So what exactly are those Biblical tenets that will provide the foundation for our decision making? Well, obviously, we've seen Jesus use the tenants of love, compassion, forgiveness and mercy. We need to start there. But listen also to what St. Paul says, "And now, dear brothers and sisters, fix your thoughts on whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable. Think about things that are excellent and worthy of praise." Just imagine if all our decision making was grounded in these values. That is the standard we are to strive for, and why our decision making is so important to our lives.

Now does that mean we won't ever make mistakes and stumble along the way. No! Of course we will! Time and time again we will fall short. But here's our hope and assurance. In the Bible, God says, "I am he who blots out your transgressions and remembers your sin no more." The Apostle John writes, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness." God is not a punitive God who adheres solely to the letter of the law. When you come to God in repentance, looking for that second chance, no matter what mistakes you have made...you come to a God who assures you, "Neither do I condemn you." Neither do I condemn you.

Which leads me to the second lesson we are to take from today's Scripture. And that has to do with our own self-righteousness, our judgmental attitudes, our propensity to condemn others. Because when Jesus asked the adulteress, "Woman where are your accusers?" the answer for her was clear. There were none! You see, Jesus convicted those persons judging her with the simple statement, "Let anyone among you who is without sin throw the first stone." And in hearing this, her accusers became deeply aware of their own shortcomings, weaknesses, mistakes...and their own self-righteous attitudes. And they realized that they were not worthy to judge another person. So they walked away and let Jesus be the one to deal with her. And the same thing holds true for you and me as well. We have absolutely no authority to judge anyone else. God alone is their final judge. For we do not know their stories, we have not walked in their shoes.

You know, the Bible doesn't tell us what happened to the adulteress. But I'm guessing it was something like this... word of her pardon spread through the streets of Jerusalem like wildfire. Security alert, ladies!! She's back! Guard your men! Here she comes! Everybody knows her reputation as a loose woman, who liberally spread her favors around to all the men who would have her. Now here she comes in broad daylight. Walking upright, like she's been given a new lease on life. She's no longer covering her face with the end of her shawl. Lord, help us all!! People are trying to get near her, up close to her, to get a good look at her, wondering what she might be thinking and feeling. Why, she's so young! Just a teenager. Wait a minute. What's that sound. Listen. Is that a tune she's singing to herself? Yes, it is. Shhhh. Listen... *Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost but now am found, was blind, but now, I see...*

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choices and decisions based on the values of a culture gone awry or the on the mores of a society gone astray. All we have to do is look around to see the results when choices are made that follow the ways of the culture, rather than follow the ways of God. Drug and alcohol abuse, suicide, violence on social media, dysfunctional families, unwanted pregnancy, hatred and tension, and more. One simple decision, one simple choice on how we act, can have far-reaching effects, not only for us, but for others too. That's why our daily decisions have to be grounded in a clear understanding of Christian principles and ethics.

So what exactly are those Biblical tenets that will provide the foundation for our decision making? Well, obviously, we've seen Jesus use the tenants of love, compassion, forgiveness and mercy. We need to start there. But listen also to what St. Paul says, "And now, dear brothers and sisters, fix your thoughts on whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable. Think about things that are excellent and worthy of praise." Just imagine if all our decision making was grounded in these values. That is the standard we are to strive for, and why our decision making is so important to our lives.

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