

Finding Forgiveness

Sterling UMC
November 21, 2010
John 8:1-11

Hold up the Stone. Feel the texture. Feel the weight. Imagine the pain that something like this would inflict on a defenseless person. Imagine this stone and others even larger in the hands of an angry mob with arms cocked and ready to hurl them at you. This is what the poor woman in our story today was experiencing.

The story begins with a woman who had been dragged out of her house by a couple of her pastors; they had not even given her time to comb her hair or properly dress. She had been caught red-handed, found committing adultery. Immediately the church was notified in order that justice might be served, because according to Jewish law any woman who committed adultery was to be stoned to death.

You can imagine the crowd that gathered around as this pious parade of Pharisees ushered the shame-faced woman through the streets of her village.

How do you suppose they treated her, the hometown folk? Can you imagine it would be any different than when scandals break loose in our own communities? Whispers and accusations abounded, "opportunist, home-wrecker, tramp" - who knows all the names with which she was pummeled as she was led through the streets? And where was the man, the partner in her transgression? Why wasn't he there? Why was he not brought with her to be beaten down by their self-righteous condemnation? Apparently there were two standards in operation at the time, one for women and one for men.

In any case, the priests decided that the woman would be a test case to check on the moral values of the teacher, Jesus from Nazareth. They heard that he was soft on sinners, that he sat and ate with them, that he befriended them and offered them love and forgiveness. "What will this world become," they muttered to themselves, "if the laws against sin are not upheld, if sinful behavior is not punished." So with grim determination they charged through the city with the convicted woman in tow. Suddenly they appeared before a startled Jesus. "Rabbi," they say, "this married woman was found in another man's bed. You know the law of Moses says she deserves to be stoned to death for her adultery. What do you say about her?"

The trap has been set; the bait is deliciously scandalous; there was no way the Rabbi could escape. If he said, "let the woman go," the people would see that he disregarded the laws of Moses and could not be taken seriously. If he said, "Go ahead and stone her," he would be seen as a man without mercy and as one who violated his own words of love and forgiveness.

For a long time Jesus knelt, deep in thought, and wrote with his finger on the ground. In fact, he took so much time that the priests became impatient and demanded an answer

from him. Finally he said, "You are right. According to the Law of Moses she deserves to be killed. Go ahead and stone her if you must, but let the first stone be thrown by someone who is without sin."

And then the Bible says, "When they heard it, they went away, one by one, and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him." In the faces of the self-righteous mob she found condemnation. In the face of Jesus she found forgiveness.

There are so many people like the woman in this story in our world. They are caught in the trap of sin. They are suffering. They are desperate. They do not know where to turn. Like this woman they are guilty, they are humiliated, they are in need of grace. Where are they going to find forgiveness? Are they going to find it here? Will they find it by turning to the church? Or will they find instead a critical and judgmental spirit that condemns them and rejects them?

You know the sad thing is that far too often the latter is true. We in the church are so much like the Pharisees in the story. We develop a smug, pious, holier than thou attitude toward others. I mean how often are we quick to point out someone else's faults? Enjoy exposing another's weakness? Delight in hearing and spreading all the latest dirt about another person's life? Quick to condemn those who have sinned or who have wronged us? Ask God to forgive our sins while at the same time we hold a grudge or even worse seek revenge?

Why did these men want to throw stones? The same reason that we want to throw them.

- We throw stones because we harbor hatred
- We throw stones because we hold on to bitterness
- We throw stones because we are entangled in anger
- We throw stones because we want to have revenge
- We throw stones because we will not let go of the things that upset us

If any of you is without sin, let them be the first to throw a stone. Can we really afford to throw stones? We all make mistakes. We all have sinned. We all have the same spiritual need for Jesus.

We would never think of actually throwing stones at other people but we far too often throw emotional or spiritual stones at others.

- Hurtful comments
- Use generalizations
- Gossip
- Judgmental statements
- Harsh with the truth

So that leads me to this question. Where do you see yourself in the story? How do we like the adulterous woman find forgiveness?

We find it when we realize that

1. Jesus' forgiveness of my sin is not based on my innocence. This woman was caught in the act. Have you ever been caught in the act? She was guilty of the crime. Her accusers were correct. She didn't have any defense. The only thing that was left to be decided was what they were going to do about her guilt.

Likewise the Bible records that when it comes to guilt or innocence, all of us are guilty of sin. Romans 3:23 says, "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." From the time of Adam and Eve until today and on as long as the human race survives, every person that is born will be born a sinner. The forgiveness that Jesus offers to us is not because of our innocence. It is in spite of our guilt.

2. Jesus' forgiveness of my sin is not limited by the severity of my sin. This woman, who stood before Jesus and the crowd of her accusers, had just committed the act of adultery. The sin that she committed was a serious crime. It is not considered a serious crime in our day, but it was then. It was one of many crimes that carried the death penalty. It was ranked right along with murder, kidnapping, witchcraft, & offering human sacrifice.

There she is standing there for all to see her and the wickedness of the crime that she had committed. She knew what she had done. And she knew that it was a sin deserving of death. But what she did not yet know was that no matter how severe her sin was, Jesus could still forgive her. (Isa 1:18 NIV) "Come now, let us reason together," says the LORD. "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool." No matter how severe her sin was, and no matter how severe your sin might be, God's grace and God's forgiveness is always greater. Some people will not come to Jesus because they think that they have gone beyond the scope of God's forgiveness. If God can forgive that woman, and if He can forgive those who put Jesus on the cross, and if He can forgive me, then He can forgive anyone. If you are alive, you are not outside the reach of God's forgiveness.

3. Jesus' forgiveness of my sin is not because He sets aside the requirements of the law. The Pharisees thought that they had Jesus in a position where there was no way that he could get out of a sticky mess. If Jesus set aside the requirements of the law, then they could arrest Jesus for blasphemy and turn the people against Him. If He went along with their plan and stoned the woman, then they could get Him in trouble with the Romans. How can Jesus be just and let her off the hook? The reason that Jesus could be just is because He took the penalty that she owed, and He placed it on Himself. A year or so after this woman's encounter with Jesus, Jesus hung on a cross. One of the sins that He paid for as He hung there was this woman's act of adultery.

When Jesus offers forgiveness to us, the only reason that He can do so is because the penalty that we owed has already been paid. It was paid by Him. Every lie that you have said, every hateful word that has come out of your mouth, every unkind thought that you

have ever held onto, every look of jealousy and envy, every lustful thought – every sin makes you guilty before God. But every one of those sins was placed on Jesus, and He paid for each and every one with His own blood. 1 Peter 2:24 says it like this, “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.” Jesus didn’t set aside the penalty that that woman owed. He paid the penalty Himself.

4. Jesus’ forgiveness of my sin is the only thing that stands between me and death.

That woman had no one standing with her on that day. The law was against her because of her crime. The crowd was against her because they wanted to destroy Jesus. She was getting ready to face death by stoning. There was no one to stand between this woman and death – no one except Jesus.

There was not one thing that that woman could do to get herself out of the mess that she was in. There was no one that she could turn to. Everyone was against her. There was only one person that she could look to for help, and He was the only way that she was going to find deliverance. That one person, and the only way, was Jesus. He was the only thing that stood between her and death.

Do you understand that this is true for you and for me as well? Your parents don’t stand between you and death. Your spouse doesn’t stand between you and death. Your money doesn’t stand between you and death. Your church attendance doesn’t stand between you and death. Your self-righteousness doesn’t stand between you and death. The only thing that stands between you and eternal death is Jesus Christ and the forgiveness that He provides through His death on the cross.

7. Jesus’ forgiveness of my sin proves that His desire is to heal me not condemn me.

There they stood – the accused woman and Jesus. Nothing was left of the shouts and the angry words and those who had spoken them. The only evidence that they had ever been there was the rocks that were scattered on the ground all around them. Jesus had every right to pick up those stones and kill her Himself. But he did not do that. Jesus is holy and sinless. Here He is standing next to a woman who was drenched in sin. Why didn’t He condemn her? Well John 3:16-17 puts it this way, “For God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.” If God’s purpose was to condemn sinners, then why did Jesus come to earth and die? God’s purpose is not to condemn sinners. His purpose is to heal sinners. Though we are sinners, deserving of punishment, that is not God’s desire for us. His desire is that we realize our sin, confess it to Him, receive Jesus’ gift of grace, and be healed to live a brand new life.

8. Jesus’ forgiveness of my sin does not give me permission to remain in my sin.

Before Jesus and the woman parted ways on that day, He gave her only one piece of instruction. "Go and sin no more." He told her to stop doing what she had been doing that got her in this mess in the first place. Jesus wasn't talking about sinless perfection. He was talking about repentance. You see Jesus always accepts and forgives us just as we are, but He doesn't want us to stay there. Once we have been forgiven, our goal and our all-consuming passion is to be live holy lives out of love for the one who gave so much for us.

So let me ask you this morning, do you need to find forgiveness? Do you need to find the love, acceptance and forgiveness that Jesus offered to this adulterous woman?

CONCLUSION

The teachers of the law and the Pharisees were right about two things on that day. The payment for sin only comes through a death. Either you can pay for your sins with your own eternal death in hell, or you can accept the death of Jesus as payment for your sins. The second thing that they were right about is when you find a person trapped in sin, the only good thing that you can do is to take them to Jesus.

If you are here this morning, and you have already accepted Jesus as your savior and received his forgiveness, you may be having some trouble understanding how you should respond to this passage. Can I make a couple of suggestions?

First, let it be a reminder of what you have been forgiven. When we forget what we have been forgiven, we either fall back into it, or we lose our love for the one who forgave us.

Second, let it be a challenge to examine yourself. Are you living a life of sin right now? Is there something for which you need forgiveness? Is there something that you need to leave behind?

Third, let it be an example for the kind of forgiveness that we are supposed to give to one another and to those that are a part of our everyday life.

If you are not a Christian and have never received Jesus' forgiveness for your sin, then the application to you should be clear. This is an invitation for you to receive forgiveness for your sin and cleansing from your guilt. No sin is too great to be forgiven, and no sin is too small to need forgiving.