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***John 8: 1 - 11*

I came across this recently by a Mark Mitchell, from California

***“Several years ago I was moved by the writings of three well-known Christian authors, one of them being Eugene Peterson. I wrote each of them a letter expressing my appreciation for their insights into spiritual formation. I also mentioned in each note that I'd love to spend some time with them if there ever might be an opportunity to do so.*

Within a few weeks I received gracious letters back from the other two authors, but I waited for my reply from Eugene Peterson. Months passed, and it never arrived. My cynical mind concluded that this man, who had written so eloquently about being an “unbusy pastor,” was just too busy (or too important) to write me back.

A year later, I was speaking to a small group of people, and I mentioned the three letters I'd written and the results, including Peterson's non-response.

Little did I know that one of the women in the audience that night happened to be a good friend of Peterson. She told me that she was scheduled to see him in the near future, and she'd ask him about my letter.

A few weeks later, a hand-written letter arrived from Eugene Peterson. He explained he'd received my letter a year earlier but had lost the envelope with my return address. To my surprise, he'd kept the letter on his desk for the entire year, praying that somehow he'd discover where to send his response. A few weeks later, when we met for lunch, we both marveled at God's providence, and he kindly accepted my apology for presuming I knew why he'd not written. Indeed, he was as “unbusy” as his writings led me to believe.

Sometimes we presume to know why people don't meet our expectations, but so often we don't know the whole story.

***That little story brought to my mind something that took place when Dianna and I were serving in our first appointment. I was in the process of ordination, which is still quite lengthy but back then was even more complicated than it is now. There were a series of deadlines and required meetings, case studies and one retreat for all the prospective elders and their spouses.*

I told my church that I was going on that retreat – and so was Dianna. A few weeks after we returned, it dawned on me that a family that we saw in Church nearly every week had not been there recently. Now, this couple happened to also be friends of ours - we thought, anyway.

So, I called them up. “Hey! Haven’t seen you in a couple weeks. Hope everything is OK!”

Their response: “We’ve decided to leave the church. We’re now going to _____.”

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I was shocked! “What happened?”

Again, their response: “Well, a couple weeks ago (the weekend of that retreat) my mother went into the hospital [and incidentally, not that it mattered, but this mother was not a member of my church]... “We tried to call you so you could go visit her, and you weren’t there for us.”

I tried to explain that I was at an event the Annual Conference required for my ordination, and that there were other people in the church that would have been happy to visit... but it didn’t matter. They were done with me and the church. That one hurt....

Both of those illustrations are examples of times when people made a hasty judgment. They didn’t have the whole picture, but they thought they did. And the result was hurt, or embarrassment.

Now, the thing is, I could tell stories like this for 20 minutes this morning, and at the end conclude that we should “Think before we respond to someone” because often we lack information about situations, and people, and people’s actions. We rarely have the ‘whole’ picture.” Then we could end with a prayer, and a song, and a benediction... and then, “Nice sermon, Pastor... Cool stones, too” But you know what?

That message would not have *anything at all* to do with today’s Scripture reading. And do you know what the most ‘tell-tale’ giveaway of that would be? It’s this: in *that* sermon, no one would feel nervous, or uneasy as you listened to it. You might even feel ‘righteous’ and want to say “Amen!”

No one would leave after hearing that message thinking that maybe Pastor Steve needs a vacation, because he’s really gone over the edge this time! No one would be offended by that message!

And yet, *all of those responses were what not only the people who were present with Jesus on that day felt (except, of course, the woman), but they were also the responses of the early church to this story.*

**You probably noticed that verses 1 – 11 in John 8 are typically set apart in most translations. Either they are relegated to a footnote, or they are placed in brackets, or italics. The reason for that is that the authenticity of this passage is in dispute. Unlike most textual disputes, however, this one is not over a verb tense, or an alternate spelling, a synonym used or a short phrase that was left out or repeated –

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which is what most of these textual ‘issues’ are, really. To have an *entire* narrative in dispute is *unusual*, to say the least.

And, you know, there are lots of ‘stories’ about Jesus that didn’t make the cut in the New Testament that we read today. They were left out of the canon for a lot of reasons: for their

- less than credible sources (dubious *authorship*)
- their *lateness* in appearing on the literary scene
- their questionable *content*, and the like.

(So, you know, those ‘cable documentaries’ on the “LOST BOOKS OF THE BIBLE!” or “THE SECRET LIFE OF JESUS” that the “Church” doesn’t want you to know about, these are all... hooey!

These writings are neither lost nor secret, they’re just *rejected!*

But anyway, some important early MSS’s (Gospel texts) do not have *this story* in them. But, the ones that *do* keep it, are very credible. And in addition to that, the account itself rings true (i.e., it certainly fits the character of Jesus). So, what’s going on? Why would some reliable manuscripts have this and others, not?

Well, the best theory of the textual experts is that the story *is* authentic, it *did* happen, but it was left out of some very early Manuscripts by the Scribes who were copying them... *on purpose!*

Why? Because it was upsetting. It was *offensive*. They were afraid of what might happen in this newly developing church if a scandalous narrative like this one became well known. It’s going to open the door to – lawlessness! We can’t have this! It’s confusing! It condones sin! So, I have to say, if today’s message doesn’t make you squirm at least a *little* bit... then I’m doing an injustice to this passage!

What was so upsetting about it? Let’s look at the details again....sometimes we know a story so well that we don’t hear it like the original hearers did.

**So notice this: first of all, this woman’s “offense” was *not* (unlike my opening illustrations) a matter of having a lack of information, or a misunderstanding of some circumstances. Her offense was very

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real. She was ‘caught in the act’ of adultery. There is no implication here that the point is that ‘if you just knew what was *really* going on...’ things would be better understood. No, that’s not it.

Now, of course, we know that you can’t commit the act of adultery alone. So you have to immediately wonder “Where is the man?” The accusers invoked Leviticus 20:10 and Deut 22:22 and stated that “the *Law demands* that this woman should be stoned. But what do *you* say?” (They overlooked the fact that the Law actually required that *both* the man and the woman should be stoned!) They are already being selective.

Were the scribes and the Pharisees really concerned about the Law of Moses here? No! Were they really concerned about holiness? No. They were concerned about putting Jesus in a dilemma (John 8:6). This woman was just like that blind man from last week’s message – a pawn, an example, a *nobody* to them. I wonder sometimes if the reason the man isn’t there with her, is that he was part of the ‘set-up’? Well, who knows, but this wasn’t about righteousness.

They were trying to trap Jesus. If he thought that stoning was too harsh, and told them to turn her loose, he would have been in violation of the Law of Moses. On the other hand, had he said “Stone her!”, he would have been in violation of Roman Law (because only Rome could condemn a person to death). Either way would have given the Pharisees an ‘excuse’ for more accusations against him.

But, notice: her ‘violation’ of the Law was very real, in spite of the motivations of her accusers.

Let me make another observation that is related to this (remember, we’re trying to understand why this passage was offensive to the early church). So how about this one?

Before Jesus says to her “Neither do I condemn you”, where does it say that ‘the woman repented’? I’ll give you a big hint... *nowhere!* I’m just pointing out what is here in the text! (Or *not*, as the case may be.) Jesus does say to her, “Go, and sin no more” (or, TNIV, “Go and leave your life of sin”) but this is absolutely *after* he first says to her... “Neither do I condemn you”.

Now, this likely is the source of the issue those early copyists had with this passage. I don’t have a problem with it, because I’m convinced that God’s Grace is not only greater than our sin, but it is greater than our comprehension. I think we’re more likely to limit grace than God is. So, if Jesus wants

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to unilaterally forgive this woman (or anyone else) I say, “Praise God!” There’s not one of us here who has ‘earned’ the right to receive God’s Grace anyway! (But she gets a choice at the end – just like we talked about last week with the man born blind. Go and sin no more!)

But Jesus here imposes another condition of the Law that they had overlooked. That is, that the one who executed the law must be free *from the same sin*, lest by stoning the woman he condemn himself as worthy of a like death.

The Pharisees knew that Jesus knew about their lives! He had already called them ‘a wicked and adulterous generation’ (Matthew 16:4). These scribes and Pharisees forgot, too, that Moses demanded that the witnesses (the accusers) of someone who was to be stoned should cast the first stone.

****“The hands of the witnesses must be the first in putting that person to death, and then the hands of all the people...” (Deuteronomy 17:5-7)*

Understanding the details of the Law then, we have to conclude that Jesus meant that the ones who cast the stones at this woman must *be innocent of the sin for which they wished the woman to be slain*, i.e., let the one who is not guilty of this *same sin* cast the first stone. Yeow! The Lord’s answer to them apparently struck home. They realized the truth that freedom from the outward act did not imply inward purity or sinlessness. Purity goes way deeper than that. And so, in shame, they left one by one – beginning with the older ones...(perhaps wisdom does come with age?)

A question this passage raises then, is not: “Who is without sin?” – the Bible makes *that* clear – no one is! (“...we all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23).

This passage made some people in the early church uncomfortable – and probably many today as well. But this passage needs to be interpreted, just like any other, in the bigger context of Scripture. When we look at it like that, we can see that it is not about lawlessness.... It is not about overlooking sin, and never holding anyone accountable

****But it does illustrate to us that there is a difference between recognizing sin, and judging it. Jesus said “Don’t judge, lest you be judged”. And, consistent with the rest of Scripture, this passage reminds

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us that it is not up to us to judge others; that is the sole domain of God. We are not capable of the knowledge necessary to judge someone, and we do not understand God's Grace deeply enough.

There are times when we and others need to be held accountable for our actions. The world can't exist apart from that sort of justice – because we know that evil is very real, and human nature is flawed. But, again, there is a vast difference between accountability and judgment.

See, judgment implies *punishment*. These people wanted to punish this woman (they wanted to punish Jesus too!) And Jesus showed us by his example that there are times when mercy trumps justice. There are times when *we* simply need to walk away, too.

We don't pick up stones ready to fling them at someone who has hurt us. But we have other – very effective – ways to punish others when we're simply looking for vengeance. You know what I'm talking about... we can share stories about someone, slander them. Or, even, just tell the truth, but tell it in a way that is clearly meant to hurt that person. (Oh, let me tell you what he/ she is *really* like!)

We use the 'silent treatment' on people as another way of punishment. I am going to make you pay for what you did by not speaking to you! We can punish people (so we think) by rejoicing in their suffering, and maybe wishing for bad stuff to happen. We can punish people by constantly bringing up and reminding them of their failures in the past.

That happens in marriages, doesn't it? I read a wise word about that recently, from a source that surprised me:

***“It is impossible to keep peace between man and woman in family life if they do not condone and overlook each other's faults but watch everything to the smallest point. For who does not at times offend? Thus many things must be overlooked; very many things must be ignored that a peaceful relation may exist.”*

That was written in the 1600's by Martin Luther! Jesus demonstrates in this passage how that might look, and this woman is granted a new life as a result. The 'point' of it is that we first recognize that we are all sinners before we feel the urge to judge - and punish - others.

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**And to help us keep that in mind, you've all been given today a '*first stone*'! Put this someplace where it can remind you to ask in prayer to be given the mind of Christ whenever you are tempted to forget that we are *all* sinners. Pick it up and use it as a centering tool as you pray for the forgiveness of someone that you would really rather punish. Let it remind you that in the Scripture it is the Lord who says, "I will repay"... not *us*.

And let this stone remind you that the 'payment' for all our sin has been made. And rejoice in the Grace that saves even you.