

Sermon January 20, 2022  
Luke 6:37-42

### “The Log in Our Eyes”

One of the more embarrassing moments in my ministry took place early on when I was serving my first congregation in Vermont. One particular Sunday my sermon was based on the story of the woman caught in adultery. When it came time for the reading of the scripture I opened the large lectern Bible to the eighth chapter of the Gospel of John, looked down, and could not find the story. That’s strange I thought, and I began to wonder if I had gotten the chapter wrong, so I started flipping pages back and forth trying to find the story. As the congregation began looking at me somewhat quizzically, I began to panic. Maybe I had mistakenly gotten the gospel wrong! Maybe it was in Matthew, or Luke, or Mark. Feeling quite frustrated I sheepishly closed the Bible, and just told the story as best I could from memory.

After the service was over, I opened the Bible once more to the eight chapter of John to try to find why I had messed up, when I noticed a little footnote. It said that some Bibles do not include the story, because many scholars believe that it was not in the original Gospel of John, but that it was added on at a later date - however, it may have been a part of oral tradition handed down over the course of years. But whether it was a part of the original gospel or not, it still fits Jesus’ character quite well.

In a nutshell, a crowd had gathered, and following ancient law they were about to stone a woman to death because she had been caught in adultery. But Jesus interceded and said to the crowd “Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” Being cowed by his words, the crowd dispersed, and Jesus turned to the woman and asked, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you? She said, “No one, sir.” And Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you. Go your way and from now on do not sin again.”

When I was a young child, my grandparents took me to a drive-in theater to see the movie. “The King of Kings”, and though I may have not known at that age what adultery was, I remember being quite moved by that particular scene. Certainly, I had heard stories of people being cast into the fires of Hell for their misdeeds, but here was Jesus showing such mercy and refusing to condemn! Could it be that God was so forgiving? No doubt I had heard stories of a God that was wrathful and angry, but this was something very different!

Over the course of centuries, the image of Jesus changed from one era to the next. In the Middle Ages He was often seen as Christ Pantocrator, the Great Judge. In the art of the era, he often looked a frightful figure. In Michelangelo’s great fresco of the Last Judgement in the Sistine Chapel, a stern looking Jesus, with a wave of His hand casts sinners into a hellish pit. But does such an image jive with the one who refused to condemn the sinful woman?

In the 17th century, Jonathan Edwards preached his famous sermon, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God”. How often have people been driven into the church on the basis of fear, rather than lured by a compassionate and loving God?

Perhaps it might be more accurate to speak of sinners in the hands of an upset God, meaning that God is dismayed by the amount of evil that still exists on this planet, exhibited by the presence of exploitation, cruelty, violence, discrimination, and never ceasing warfare. Yet, I don’t believe that God is ready to give up on us. In the second chapter of Romans Paul asks, “Do you not realize that God’s kindness is meant to lead us to repentance?” In other words,

God's call for repentance arises out of kindness, i.e., love, not wrath. Following the well-known verse, John 3:16, which declares that "God so loved the world" John writes, "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved by him." This does not deny the possibility of condemnation, meaning judgement, because John goes on to say, "Those who believe in him (namely Jesus Christ) are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God." Notice the words "condemned already" which suggests that this statement is not about final judgement. It rests on the shoulders of those who sin in this life, in which there is always room for forgiveness. Again, the call to repentance arises out of kindness, not wrath.

But the fact of God's forgiveness then places a certain responsibility on us, which is spoken of in this morning's reading from Luke, in which Jesus says, "Do not judge, and you will not be judged, do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you." In the second chapter of Romans, Paul makes a similar comment, saying, "Therefore, you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others: for in passing judgement on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things." Now, to say you are doing the very same things does not necessarily mean you are committing the exact same sinful actions, but that you are also not free from sin. This is what Jesus was pointing to when he challenged those who were not without sin to cast the first stone. The woman survived because none could claim to be sinless. Paul says in Romans 3:23, "For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.... In this instance, the glory of God is absolute righteousness.

Notice that Paul said, "whoever you are". He's talking to all of us. The great reformer, Martin Luther, used a Latin phrase, "Simul Justus et Peccator". What that means is that we are simultaneously saint and sinner. How is this possible? According to Romans 3:24, those who fall short of the glory of God, "are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Jesus Christ." We will continue to do things throughout our lives that are displeasing to God but extends to us the gift of forgiveness through his grace. This does not give us license to do sinful things. Our desire should be to do that which is righteous out of gratitude for God's gift, and the question then falls on us - are we willing to extend that gift to others - particularly those who have done us harm?

To refuse to judge those who have hurt us, or who have hurt others, is not always an easy thing to do, but no one has ever suggested that following Jesus would be easy. As Dorothy Day once said, "I think if you take the Lord's words, you'll find they're pretty rigorous. The Sermon on the Mount may be read with great enjoyment, but when it comes to practicing it, it really is an examination of conscience to see how far we go."

One last point - to say that we do not pass judgement on others does not mean acceptance of hurtful, immoral, destructive sinful actions. For a just and peaceful world, we have to be able to make moral judgements. Justice is also important. But we are not to make final judgements concerning their place in God's eyes. That judgement belongs to God and God alone! Amen.

**Let us pray:** Blessed are you, O God. In Christ you have given us knowledge of salvation and forgiveness of sin. You have come to us to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet in the way of peace. Therefore, we praise you with psalms and hymns with thankfulness in our hearts for your gift of yourself in Jesus. Through your Spirit, may we put on compassion, kindness, humility and patience to understand and forgive one another. Bind us together in the perfect harmony of love. May the peace of Christ rule in our hearts that we may be instruments of your peace on earth. Amen.