

“The Good News is Rooted in Justice & Mercy”

John 8:2-11

First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)

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A friend of mine recently asked this question in her sermon: What is the most transformational three-word phrase in the English language?

How would you answer?

Her congregation answered, as I suspect many of you might, with the words, “I love you.”

And those *are* impactful words. They *do* make a difference.

But, that wasn't the answer she was looking for. No, instead she said that the most transformational phrase is “shame on you.”

Sit with that for a moment.

After all, we live in a culture that too often deals in the currency of shame. Shame is dealt out in the words, the expressions, the tone, the ridicule, the breaths and the sighs of people. In big and in small ways these experiences shape us.

As an elementary aged child my least favorite class was gym. This was true when we ran...it was true when we played dodgeball...this was especially true when we were doing things like pull ups and climbing the rope - you know that rope, the one that ascended to the high ceiling of the gym. Climbing the rope was for me the thing nightmares were made of. And in every one - the nightmares while I slept and the real life nightmare of being in gym class - my gym teacher stood at the bottom of the rope with an expression that told me I was worthless and the task for me was impossible. And just in case I hadn't felt it already, the one day in all my elementary school years when I had made further than ever before, when I could actually envision the possibility of making it to the top and touching the ceiling...suddenly class was over, the teacher blew his whistle, and proceeded to yell at me to get down. There was no grace for a child whose shame just might be conquered.

Shame is everywhere.

Children whose families don't have enough feel it.

Young people whose bodies don't match the likely-AI generated forms they see online feel it.

Women for whom a date turns into a nightmare feel it.

Men who choose vulnerability in a world that too often demands toughness feel it.

Aging adults who would help anyone, but who don't want to receive that same help themselves feel it.

People who lose their independence feel it.

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And while we might say that transitions are hard, that being different is hard, that life is hard...while we might say that embarrassment is natural...shame is nurtured by our cultural convictions rooted in power and toxic perceptions of perfection.

Unfortunately this is a reality that has been part of the human condition for far too long.

Jesus was teaching. And, in an effort to make a fool of him, some leaders came, dragging along a woman for whose humanity they had no regard. She was not a human to them, but merely a 2-dimensional prop used for their purposes.

“She has been caught in the act of adultery,” they said. And they didn’t say it quietly to Jesus. They didn’t come seeking insight. Rather this was a public performance intended to capture the attention of everyone within earshot. We can imagine their voices didn’t even feign a whisper, but instead announced with authority her sin.

And yet Jesus wasn’t willing to jump onboard the shame train.

In fact, there is this strange thing that happens in the scripture. It actually happens twice. We are told Jesus bent down and was writing with his finger on the ground. People over the centuries have wondered what he was writing.

Was he writing out what the law of Moses actually required? Perhaps reminding these leaders that the law they cited against the woman, which can be found in both Leviticus and Deuteronomy (Leviticus 20:10 and Deuteronomy 22:22) was actually to be enforced against both parties in the encounter? Or was he writing a reminder that although the law was on the books it was seldom practiced since by their time capital punishment was much more restricted?

Was he writing the name of the man who had been with this woman? Perhaps someone from that very crowd?

Was he writing a list of sins committed by these haughty accusers in an effort to cause them to take a beat and give some thought to how convinced they were that everyone should be held accountable for their actions?

Was he simply doodling as he paused in communion with God, breathing in and out the Spirit, garnering the strength for this confrontation?

Was he doodling to give the accusers time to become uncomfortable with their own behavior?

Was he writing words of grace...reminders of God’s mercy and justice which looks more like the leveling of the playing field than a focus on punishment?

We won’t ever know. We are left to assume...to infer...to wonder. But what we do know is what the gospel writer tells us Jesus did and Jesus said.

“Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her (John 8:7, NRSVUE)”, he said. He called their conscience, their empathy, and the God they claimed to obey into the conversation.

The accusers slowly turned and went away.

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And being left alone with the woman, Jesus stood up and looked her in the eye - giving her the dignity and respect that had been neglected by her accusers. He looked her in the eye with a look that likely acknowledged the greatest sin of those men was to consider her expendable.

Not only did he look at her. He spoke to her and in doing so he gives the woman back her voice. She moves from being a 2-dimensional prop to a human being who is regarded for her full humanity. And after they remark that her accusers are gone, Jesus says to her, "Neither do I condemn you."

And here we witness mercy at work. Mercy, defined by Merriam-Webster as, "compassion, leniency, or restraint...shown especially to an offender or to one subject to the power of another" ([MERCY Definition & Meaning - Merriam-Webster](#)).

Let's be honest, while women mattered in any number of ways to the culture around Jesus, they were also controlled by systems that were structured against them. She could not defend herself. She could not decide for herself. She could not stand up against her accusers. Not without the mercy of another.

Jesus gave the gift of mercy. He also gave the gift of justice. Because remember, our common concepts of justice are too often different from the Bible's. "Biblical justice is the moral and spiritual principle of fairness, righteousness, and protection of the vulnerable, reflecting God's character and will" (Copilot search for "biblical justice definition").

Jesus saw her humanity. He saw the shame that others were heaping upon her. And he responded with mercy and justice and love.

Because, after all, he knew the heart of God. He knew that this woman's identity as a child of God wasn't dependent upon her behavior or upon the opinions of those around here, but was simply foundational to who she was.

In the book *The Shack* Papa, the name for the God character, says to the main character Mack, "You have such a small view of what it means to be human. You and this creation are incredible, whether you understand that or not. You are wonderful beyond imagination. Just because you make horrendous and destructive choices does not mean you deserve less respect for what you inherently are - the pinnacle of my creation and the center of my affection" (Wm. Paul Young, *The Shack*, Windblown Media 2007; 192).

I wonder how this story would have been different if each person there had known themselves as the pinnacle of God's creation and the center of God's affection.

I wonder how our world would be different if each person today knew themselves in that way.

I wonder how you and I might live differently, might respond differently, might love differently if we knew deep within ourselves that God loves us, no matter what.

Friends, stand tall, let your voice be heard, know that you are more than your worst mistake and that your value comes not in what you do or what you leave undone. Your value comes because you are God's great creation and God's deep love. Amen.