

The Trap of Judgment OR Withholding That First Stone
Lent 2015: I'm Not Okay
Sermon on John 8:2-20 (3/14 & 3/15/15)
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It is a truth universally acknowledged¹ that, when you think you have kicked a bad habit, an enticing opportunity *will* emerge and you *will* find yourself right back in the thick of that bad habit. I don't care what the bad habit – or even addiction – might be...but it's gonna happen. And it happened to me just the other day.

The bad habit I thought I was close to kicking was *judgmentalism*. Turns out I wasn't as close to kicking it as I thought I was!

See, a friend informed me of something that was going on in the life of someone we both know and I just went *off*.

You know how it goes: you hear that so-and-so did something and all of a sudden your hackles are up...your brain kicks into overdrive...and the unkind thoughts just flow out of you somewhat uncontrollably.

I like to think of myself as a mostly-kind person who tries to have sympathy for people who say or do things with which I disagree. I try to understand where they were coming from. I consider past hurts that may have caused them to behave in troubling ways. And I also try to reflect on why that particular person who did that particular thing bothered me so much.

When I find myself being judgmental, *that* is the hardest thing for me to reflect on...because, quite often, when someone does something that sets me off, their behavior somehow connects to something in *me* I'm trying to overcome. Or it connects to a past hurt of my own that hasn't quite healed.

A couple of days ago when I got judgy about this acquaintance of mine, another friend challenged me to offer some grace...to pray for them or to offer a word of encouragement, rather than offering the ugly judgment *I* was putting out there.

At first I was a bit put off by this rebuke – annoyed that my friend wouldn't just let me rant away about this other person. But my friend was absolutely right. So I asked God to help soften my heart...to chip away some of the judgment. It's ugly anyhow and there are better ways to spend my emotional energy.

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In today's reading from John chapter eight, Jesus talked of being the “light of the world”...as one of his followers,

¹ A nod to the opening line of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*.

I realize that putting judgmental thoughts out into the world certainly doesn't help shine his light into places and people who need a little brightness.

So I will continue to ask God to soften my hard, judgmental heart.

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Now. The story from John chapter eight that occurs just prior to Jesus saying he is the "light of the world" is a fascinating story.

And the "punchline" of that story has become part of our cultural vernacular – even outside of Christian circles: that punchline, of course, being, "If any of you have never sinned, then go ahead and throw the first stone at her!" Or, as we more commonly hear and say it: "Let he who is without sin cast the first stone."

But let's get into the story itself before thinking more about those famous words...

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Jesus was teaching in the Temple – likely teaching a bunch of *men*, by the way – when some Jewish religious leaders interrupted his teaching time by presenting a woman they said was "caught in bed with a man who wasn't her husband."

"Teacher," the religious leaders said to Jesus, "this woman was caught sleeping with a man who isn't her husband. The law of Moses teaches that a woman like this should be stoned to death! What do you say?"

Our reading tells us the religious leaders had said this in order to test Jesus so they could bring a charge against him – so they'd have a valid reason to shut him up...to get him to stop teaching...to stop causing people to be so interested in him. Other translations of the Bible say the religious leaders brought this woman to Jesus in order to "trap" him.

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Keep in mind the religious law is extremely important to Jewish people. Jesus himself was Jewish and so were his first followers. For the most part, they would have known and faithfully kept the religious law. And, in fact, Jesus was quite an expert in Jewish religious law.

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Jewish religious law is laid-out in our Old Testament books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy...and there are two particular laws that are very relevant to this story in John chapter eight about the woman caught in adultery.

The first of these laws is in Leviticus chapter 20 where it states, "If any of you men [sleep] with another man's wife, both you and the woman will be put to death." The second of these relevant laws is in Deuteronomy chapter 22 where it says something similar:

“If a man is caught [sleeping] with another man's wife, you must put both of them to death.”

So, according to their religious law, both the woman *and* the man caught in adultery were to be put to death. Yet the religious leaders only presented Jesus with the *woman*. Curious, don't you think? This is why we know it was a trap: if Jesus had responded to them by saying, “Yes, you should stone her,” and had left it at that, the religious leaders could have accused Jesus of not knowing the law in its fullness.

They could have come back at him by saying, “A-ha! But the law states that the *man* should also be put to death!”

If Jesus had affirmed their accusations of the woman – and if he would have agreed it was justifiable to stone her without also stoning the *man* – Jesus would have been caught in a legal minefield...and his growing reputation as a powerful teacher would have disintegrated.

Jesus knew the religious law...and he knew the religious leaders were trying to use it to trap him. He wasn't about to fall into their trap. He also wasn't about to simply call them on it. So he sat there quietly for a bit, writing on the ground with his finger.

We don't know what Jesus was writing – that's not important to the point of the story. But, after a bit of doodling in the dust, Jesus sat up, looked at the religious leaders, and said, “If any of you have never sinned, then go ahead and throw the first stone at her!”

After saying this, he went back to writing on the ground. And Jesus sat there, writing on the ground with his finger, as, one by one, everyone else walked away, leaving the woman standing before Jesus all by herself.

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This is a powerful, powerful story that leaves a strong impression on those who read it and internalize it. And, again, Jesus' words to the religious leaders have made a strong impression on our larger culture: *let those who are without sin cast the first stone...*

“Where is everyone?’ Jesus asked the woman. ‘Isn't there anyone left to accuse you?’ ‘No one, sir,’ she said. [Then] Jesus told her, ‘I am not going to accuse you either.’”

This message is the message of grace Jesus offered to that woman so many years ago – and we all need to hear that grace, don't we? Don't we all need to hear Jesus' assurance that we are not judged or condemned for our sins? Don't we all need to be reminded that our mistakes don't have to keep haunting us?

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Just imagine how it would have felt to have been that woman: dragged by uppity, judgmental, religious leaders to become the unfortunate object lesson in a legal trap.

I do not intend to condone adultery, but can you imagine how awful it would have been to have been this woman? And the uppity, judgmental, religious leaders did not even have the courtesy to bring along the *man* with whom she was having the adulterous affair: no, she stood completely alone in their judgment.

Yet Jesus proved himself to be a *different* kind of religious leader. Rather than proving himself to be uppity and judgmental like the others, he offered patience and kindness.

“Where is everyone? Isn't there anyone left to accuse you?’ Jesus asked the woman. ‘No one, sir,’ she said. ‘[Then] I am not going to accuse you either,’ he declared.” // That Jesus did not condemn or judge her is grace enough.

But that's not where he stopped...because that's never where God stops with us. So, before she walked away from him, Jesus also said her, “You may go now, but don't sin anymore.” *Go now and find new life...live differently. Live in the grace you've just experienced.*

In this story, Jesus not only confounds the religious leaders by turning their trap upside-down, judging *them* and leaving them speechless...he also offers the woman grace and the opportunity for new life. She does not have to be defined by her sin... she does not have to be defined by her past. Grace upon grace. I. Love. This. Story.
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As many of you are aware, we have rounded the corner and are heading toward the end of our “I'm Not Okay” series during this season of Lent.

Thus far in this series we have explored many of the ways in which we humans are fragile...many of the ways in which we are not “okay.” So far, we've thought about temptation...doubts and questions of faith... physical illness...worry and fear over the future.

Next week we'll wade into loss and grief, but today we've landed on judgment – on those metaphorical “stones of judgment” we so often throw at others...even at ourselves. And we all throw these stones of judgment, don't we?

Whether the stones are thrown in the form of judgmental thoughts, condemning glances, gossipy stories...grudges we nurse. These stones are thrown at family members, friends, acquaintances, politicians, colleagues, people of differing religious and cultural groups...etcetera, etcetera.

We throw them and they certainly get thrown at us. We throw these stones of judgment for who knows how many reasons. But we don't have to. And life in this world is much more pleasant when we choose not to.

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Last fall I read a book by a popular blogger named Glennon Doyle Melton. The book is called *Carry On, Warrior* and, in it, she said something I was reminded of as I thought about today's message. She wrote, "Since brokenness is the way of folks, the only way to live peacefully is to forgive everyone constantly, including yourself."

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Now. Forgiveness is a whole other mess to talk about. It's complex...it rarely happens quickly...and when forgiveness *does* happen, we realize it *only* happens as a gift from God.

But the sentiment Glennon Doyle Melton communicates here is so important: *"Since brokenness is the way of folks, the only way to live peacefully is to forgive everyone constantly, including yourself."*

Even when you can't yet forgive, still try to be gentle with people. Be kind. Consider their wounds. Before you judge, allow room for God's grace to settle-in first. Remember that not one of us is fully "okay" at any given moment. We all require kindness. It's usually best, and most faithful, to withhold that first stone of judgment.

Of course, this doesn't mean that we should not be held accountable when we hurt others. There are – and should be – consequences to harmful words and deeds. But judgment is a trap that harms *us* far more than it harms those we judge. It's ugly. It eats away at our minds and hearts. It leaves us hardened.

So grant your fellow, fragile human beings as much grace as you can... because, the good news is that Jesus Christ grants each of *us* more grace than we could ever imagine.

It's his grace that heals our brokenness. It's his grace that makes us okay...eventually. Thanks be to God.