

Grace Space

John 8: 1 -11

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August 2, 2009

The origins of today's scripture are controversial. The HarperCollins Study Bible notes "this episode is not found in the most authoritative manuscripts," reminding us that it is from many manuscripts, some complete, some not, that our Bible is formed. Many ancient manuscripts omit this story altogether; some place this story within the gospel of Luke. Scholars will note that this account doesn't have the famous "I am" language that frequently marks stories from John.

The debate over this text is not new. It was noted by John Calvin in the early 1500s that while the story was a customary part of the Western church, it wasn't known in the Eastern church. Still, we know it does exist in some manuscripts, Calvin says, and thus it is worth our consideration. While it isn't part of the lectionary, probably because it is so questionable, I find it is a regular part of my preaching. The image of grace is so compelling that I am continually drawn back to the scene, back to the "grace space" it defines.

While grace is not a constant in the account of Jesus' ministry, for example in some of the difficult sayings of Jesus, God's grace *is* at the core of Jesus' life, death and resurrection. One of the things we often say in the Christmas Season is God came down in Jesus. We can note that as Jesus hangs from the cross he says, "Father, forgive them." It is on the road to Damascus that Paul is both blinded and set free by Jesus. It is that experience that gives birth to the "apostle to the Gentiles"—a title most of us share—and to the church which is a place to experience God's real and present grace. How many people have been brought to tears just because they've entered into a sanctuary like this one and felt here what God wants to most give to them—grace.

Ironically, as you read Calvin's commentary, you run right smack into the problem this scripture raises for us as authorities of faith. The question we always want answered is when *do* we have the right, or even the duty, to judge? Calvin argues that it is right for leaders of the church to guide their people well, even when it means correcting them. The punishment of the Catholic church was overboard, he

argues, but still the offense must be judged and the person who broke the law somehow brought back into communion with the church.

We can agree with Calvin's sentiment. We are rightly uncomfortable with what Luther calls "cheap grace". We want it to be earned. We want to hear words asking for forgiveness. At least, we want to see some tears. Further, we know that there are times when we must confront evil. We must be able to say to our youth, "that isn't okay." We must be willing to take a stand.

My friends, notice how quickly a discussion of grace turns into a question of judgment. Not all of scripture is aimed to answer the same question. If we follow the scripture's leading, this time, we are led away from judgment and into a consideration of what it is grace can do when it issues forth from Christ. There are times, God knows, what we need is not a word of judgment or a review or a punishment but rather space for grace.

I often speak of our church as a healing church. One of the ways we offer that healing is in allowing one another grace space. A case in point, when I first arrived at Community Church, Congregational, I wasn't handed a job description or a set of goals/expectations by which I would be graded. At this church, instead of tasking me with a bunch of duties someone else created, I was given keys to the church and told to go pray. I was allowed the space for God to speak to me, for God to lead me. I am still learning to "plug into" what I'm created to do. Still, thanks to you, I know that where I do plug in, there grace pours forth. And, by the way, it hasn't meant that I haven't been corrected along the way. Thankfully, people have been willing to tell me when I have crossed a line. But even these moments have been framed by grace.

So perhaps I'm preaching to the choir. Many of you already know how to create grace space. Maybe this is just a reminder of how important that space is and how important it is for us to create it in all parts of our lives. And maybe, it is a reminder for us to step into such space ourselves, this space Jesus calls us all to enter, for only when we stand in the oasis of grace is it possible to plug into God's continuing works of creation in us.

I'm struck by a pen and watercolor creation by William Blake called *The Woman Taken in Adultery*. To the right of center stands the woman, her face looking down, her hands bound together behind her back. Leaving the center of the picture is the crowd, robed, heads bare. They are the authorities in the synagogue. Their

sandaled feet turn away. I wonder, is their only role to accuse? Their bare heads are framed by the light outside.

To the left of center is Jesus in the act of standing up. Frozen before he is upright, Jesus looks at first glance as if he is bowing to a woman of royalty. One arm outstretched, one finger pointing down. His outstretched arm and body frame a foot, one foot in the act of turning away. In a moment, the foot will be gone, nothing will stand between them. Jesus and the woman will be alone. The bare foot of Jesus and the bare foot of the woman point to each other as if they know where they are soon to go.

In scripture, the woman makes no confession. She offers no apology. In Blake's portrait, she stands there, looking down, looking at the dirt. No, she is looking at Jesus. She sees him pointing to a space between them, the space vacated by those who would accuse her, the space she and Jesus can now occupy. It is the space of grace, the place where she is able to hear Jesus' voice.

The space of grace is the place where she, where we enter, despite our sin, and there hear the true voice of Christ.

We spend much too much time either as part of the crowd or listening to the crowd. Either way, we live in space that is defined by something other than Christ's grace. We live in space polluted by the crowd who conjures distorted definitions and the inner noise of knowing what it is we should have done.

Jesus sends the crowd away...oh how we need the crowd of our thoughts to go away that we might hear...but not immediately. With stones in hand the crowd seeks Jesus' *permission* to stone the woman: "Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" If you don't care about another's opinion, that person disappears into the background, and you go about your daily activities without question. Somehow, the presence of Jesus makes the crowd stop and wonder deeply enough to wait for his answer.

Notice how scripture elongates the scene. Jesus does not answer right away. Instead Jesus stayed where he was, silent, writing in the ground. The stones remain in their hands.

The law that "Moses commanded us" refers to Leviticus 20:10, "If a man commits adultery with the wife of his neighbor, both the adulterer and the adulteress shall be

put to death.” Yes, if we are literal, we all wonder where is the man? Symbolically, Jesus is the bridegroom...the church the bride...the church the woman, the church the adulterer...but that is a line of thought for another day, mentioned only to warn you against claiming misogyny and dismissing it all.

Scripture elongates the scene. Jesus does not answer right away. The stones remain in the crowd’s hands. Time passes.

How I hate waiting for an answer! At the end of the day, I want to be able to clear my desk of all that which I’ve begun. Emails fly away at the end of the week, I want to complete each task, sometimes wanting to complete tasks I’ve just created for myself. It has been known to happen that some of those last minute communications will have a stone hidden inside. But then there’s Jesus standing before me, and he leads me to wonder...maybe this can wait until Monday, maybe this would be better as a phone call, maybe I should stop for 30 minutes and pray. When Jesus is present, I don’t have that overpowering feeling that I should fling whatever I have in my mind into the air of cyberspace.

Jesus does not answer right away. The stones remain in their hands. The crowd learns its first lesson of faith, of creating grace space--sometimes we have to wait. Time passes. Then Jesus speaks the often quoted words, “Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.”

One by one, we watch them leave, until the space between us and Jesus is empty, inviting us in.

Oh, I know we have heard these words before, maybe we even quoted them from time to time. Like Calvin and those who want to defend their right to judge, the other side wants to use these words as flaming arrows against anyone who believes they have the right to judge. How often have I heard this verse quoted without any reference to the context, and surely without any intention of entering into Christ’s space of grace.

To enter into that grace space, notice one has already heard the voice of judgment--one believes in some portion of the psyche that the stones about to be thrown are just. So while there may not be tears or an apology, probably because the fear still firmly binds her, this is no cheap grace. Standing, exposed, bound by her own error, Jesus invites the woman to take a step towards him because he wants her to know God’s grace, wants her to live again.

Whether our stories of error are colorful or not, we have each experienced the feeling of being bound up by our own wrongdoing. We don't need to create a sin scale to compare or a test to weigh shame. It's not that your sin is equal to that of murderers; it is that you are in just as much need of grace as are they, just as much in need of Jesus moving toward you, inviting you to move toward him. See today, I'm not asking you to be part of the crowd (that's next week), but to stand there in the place of the woman who is both afraid of what Jesus has to say and yet compelled by a faith inside to remain that she might hear him clearly, without the noise of the crowd.

Again, scripture elongates the scene. Again, Jesus writes in the dirt, until one by one everyone has left.

Into the empty space Jesus asks, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?"

The woman speaks, "No one, Lord."

Has it ever occurred to you that what most keeps you from Jesus is the crowd you've let into your mind that accuses and excuses and bruises...as if their insight belonged to the Lord?

The crowd has left. Hear the voice of Jesus: "Has no one condemned you? Neither do I condemn you. Go your way..."

The woman is free, not to do whatever she wants, for to live in Christ, remember, is to become a force of God's nature, to be constrained and compelled to become part of God's way in this world.

"Go your way," Jesus says, "and from now on do not sin again."

It is a fitting conclusion, for the scene cannot end with any kind of acceptance of sin because grace is not the acceptance of sin. Jesus creates for us grace space, that space we need apart from the crowd, so we may ourselves turn away from sin and become part of God's way in this world, that we might live in Christ.

The rest of the story is left for us to live.

