

**GREAT MOMENTS IN SCRIPTURE (1) “Radical Acceptance” – a sermon by Gary Hindman, FPCUC. Scripture: John 8:2-11.**

*Text: “Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” --John 8:7*

This morning is the first in a series of sermons entitled “Great Moments in Scripture.” These sermons are inspired by the exciting Christian writer and Presbyterian minister, John Ortberg of Menlo Park Presbyterian Church here in California. I have used some of John’s thoughts as jumping off points for these messages and am grateful for his books, *Everybody is Normal Till You Get to Know Them* and *God is Closer Than You Think*.

John treats today’s passage in chapter five of *Everybody’s Normal...* by beginning with a story that I heard years ago in a slightly different form. It appears that there was a society formed years ago on Nantucket Island—a voluntary sea rescue mission. Apparently the rocky coast along that part of Massachusetts was very dangerous to sea-going craft, especially during a storm. So, an organization was formed to rescue people from the ravages of the sea. The group was totally voluntary. They built little look-out places all along the coast and if a ship were in trouble, they could sound a signal to assemble those who would risk life and limb to save people at sea. Often, after a storm, the people would gather for a warm, tasty meal and great fellowship.

The rescue mission was a great group of hardy souls but theirs was risky work. Over time, as I heard the story, fewer and fewer people were willing to be part of such arduous work and so they went out into the storms less and less. Still, it must be said, the little rescue mission were a friendly bunch and they would still meet on occasion for fun, food and fellowship. In fact, that is about all they do these days, for you see, they no longer see themselves in the life-saving business. Still, there are storms at sea and there are people in peril and we can only hope someone else will take over the important work the little rescue mission has abandoned!

Is that a story about a sea rescue mission? I could have sworn it was a story about church and about the Christian life. Ortberg is right; we who call ourselves followers of Jesus are in the life-saving business. If you want to follow Jesus you need to be a man or woman for others as he was. We will want to give a lending hand, a listening ear, a sympathetic touch.

I do not think we always realize how great our effect on others is. What we say and what we do mean a great deal. The words we speak and the things we do are like little life-lines that we throw to people or withhold from them. We can offer life, joy, hope acceptance, and love; or we can judge, condemn and wound. The choice is ours, but if we are in the life-saving business and if we want to follow Jesus, we will want to error (if indeed it is an error) on the sides of grace, mercy and goodness.

**A woman caught in adultery.** This brings us to today's Scripture lesson, a sad story of a woman caught in adultery. Like all stories in Scripture, this one is much more complicated than we might think on a casual, first reading.

I suppose the first thing that jumps out at us is *a woman is caught in adultery*. In his book John Ortberg lets his imagination run. It is not scriptural but it is highly possible that his musings are right on target. Who is this woman, how did her life get to this low point?

She had been someone's child, someone's precious daughter. She had been a young girl, with the dreams of a young woman—of marrying her “Prince Charming” and being loved and admired and blessed in marriage. But somewhere along the way things must not have turned out as she had hoped, in fact, things went flat. Maybe it was her fault, maybe it was his, probably it was a little of both.

So somewhere along the way she met another man. He noticed her in ways her husband did not and she began to ache for things that were not hers and were not supposed to be hers. A lingering, a shared glance, an embrace, a promise here or there—it started slowly but eventually she crossed the line, and then began a life of lying, alibis and deceit. She rationalized her behavior and tried not to think much about God or rules or propriety and for a while it worked. It worked until she was found out by certain religious officials and it is they who bring her to the Lord Jesus to see what he would do.

**Two things scream at us** in this story. *First, where's the man?* Adultery takes two and the law in Deuteronomy is quite clear. If you are “caught in the act” both man and woman are to be stoned. But where's the guy? Was he in collusion with the scribes and Pharisees so that they could set up this whole farce? Did they therefore let him slip away? Are we cynical enough to think he might have been one of them or that one or more of them might also have had relations with her? I suppose anything is possible.

The other thing is *this woman is just a pawn for trapping Jesus*. Quite frankly, the scribes and Pharisees don't give a hoot about her and the text makes that abundantly clear for right away the scene shifts from her to Jesus. You see, the scribes and Pharisees are willing to humiliate this woman publicly, even have her killed, in order to get at Jesus.

Like the Serpent in the Garden of Eden, they spring their trap on Jesus. In front of an interested crowd they ask: “Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of adultery. Now in the law, Moses commanded us to stone such a woman. Now what do you say?”

If Jesus says, “Go ahead, stone her, see if I care,” he will be exposed as harsh, unloving, unkind, and even ruthless. But if he says “Do not stone her but rather, work with her and pray with her and help her through this terrible situation,” he

will be seen as “soft on the law” and disobedient to the law. They must feel quite smug for they are certain they have trapped Jesus.

**Traditionally, there are two kinds of sin, sins of the flesh and sins of the spirit.** Sins of the flesh have to do with our appetite—lust, greed, gluttony, drunkenness, laziness and the like. Sins of the flesh usually manifest in highly visible ways—too many Krispy Kreme donuts, pornographic magazines, cars, boats and other material possessions—fallen flesh can make a false god out of just about anything, and has! Sometimes, sins of the flesh lead on to sins of the spirit. The woman caught in adultery undoubtedly was surrounded by deceit, betrayal and despair.

Sins of the spirit are harder to see. They have less to do with outward things and more to do with the soul. Arrogance and pride, jealousy and deceit are often hard to detect and hard to root out. We are often scandalized by sins of the flesh but Jesus was much more troubled by sins of the spirit, and while both are bad, the lesser of the two evils is sins of the flesh.

C.S. Lewis said, “There are two things inside me, competing with the human self which I must try to become. They are the Animal self and the Diabolical self. The Diabolical self is the worse of the two. That is why a cold, self-righteous prig who goes regularly to church may be far nearer to hell than a prostitute.”

And so this story is not just about the justice and mercy of Jesus, not just about the sins of the flesh visited upon the woman caught in adultery, but it is also about the sins of the spirit that manifest so powerfully in the pride, arrogance and deception of the self-righteous scribes and Pharisees who have prostituted the religion of Israel which is supposed to bless people to a deep relationship with God by using it to expose and defame the Son of God! They don't know it, but in some ways they are worse than she is because she has done wrong, she knows it and is ready to pay for her sins. But they are blinded to theirs, and that's irony!

**So what did Jesus do?** He bent over and began to write in the sand. No one knows what he wrote but when he was done he stood up and said, “Go ahead and stone her. That is what the Law says, only just one little thing more: let the man who is without sin throw the first stone.”

What did Jesus write in the sand? We can only guess. Perhaps he wrote out the ten commandments; perhaps he wrote out his great summary of the law, to love God and love neighbor as one's self; or, perhaps he was writing out some of the sins that the scribes and Pharisees were committing, sins of the spirit and, one by one, as he named their sins, he convicted them that they were in no position to throw the first stone. In short, he confronted their sins just as he would confront the sin of the woman.

**Jesus and the woman.** After the elders filed out, one by one, he looked at the woman and said, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” And with that he forgave her and set her free.

Ortberg reminds us that condemnation and judgment are so deeply rooted in the human condition that we can hardly imagine having to function without them, but they are very destructive. If the woman caught in adultery is to ever have a relationship with God and ever be able to repent and begin anew, she must be assured that she is forgiven and set free. And the same is true for each one of us.

We are back where we started, with the supposition that we are in the life-saving business. We are given the glorious opportunity to share the gospel of Jesus Christ who died not for the righteous but for us sinners. So let go of those stones, let go of the judgments and condemnations, they have nothing to do with Jesus and his gospel, and learn to love others as you have been loved.

**Acceptance without condoning.** But now notice something very important. Jesus accepted the woman without condoning her behavior. He did not condemn her but neither did he condone what she had been doing. “Go your way, and from now on, do not sin again,” he said.

Jesus’ acceptance is free, unmerited, full of grace and mercy, but it is also demanding. It is not cheap and easy but comes with a price. “Go and sin no more,” he said, for Jesus really and truly believes in the Law of the Old Testament, the Law that says “Thou shalt not commit adultery” or, for that matter, any of the other commandments which, if broken, lead on to waste and sorrow and other consequences.

This “Great Moment in Scripture” is an incredible teaching point. It is telling us to try something new and radical, to put down the stones that hurt and destroy and start being in the “life-saving” business. We do this as we point to Jesus in whom we have life and have it abundantly.

The church is Jesus’ community of radical acceptance. We do not condone but neither do we condemn but rather we reflect the life of him who went all the way to the cross to tell us we are loved and accepted and set free. Such good news we have to share! Thanks be to God in Jesus Christ, who gives us the victory! Amen!