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John 8:1-11

A Question of Mercy

Before Jesus looked up from where he was crouching and writing in the sand, before he asked the woman, "...has no one condemned you?" this is what he and she would have heard. *[drop rock]* Rocks dropping from the hands of her would-be executioners. The sound of mercy.

The Pharisees came to Jesus that day with an impossible choice: uphold the law of Moses and God's righteousness or show compassion and thereby condone sin. "Law or grace, Jesus? You can't have it both ways. Time to make a choice. God's justice or God's mercy, which will it be?"

Their question was meant to corner him. If he chose stoning, there was a very good chance he would lose the favor of the crowds, the ordinary people who thronged to his side to hear the good news of God's grace and feel the power of forgiveness he proclaimed. But if he chose mercy or pardon, told them to drop their stones, he could be accused of flouting the Torah in a very public arena and that would undercut his authority as a teacher. It was a well laid

snare and they knew it. They had him now, right there, in front of all those people.

Jesus didn't answer right away, perhaps buying himself time; perhaps purposefully ratcheting up the silent tension, letting those rocks they were carrying begin to feel uncomfortably heavy in their hands. He scribbled in the dirt. When again pressed for an answer, Jesus finally spoke and the truth he told made a lie of their righteous zeal: "Let anyone among you without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." He slipped right out of their snare. He didn't accept their either/or. God is just. God is merciful. And who here does not stand equally in need of both?

The sound of mercy—in this case, the rocks falling one by one from the hands of her would-be executioners—was the sound of mercy not only for the woman caught in adultery but for the stone throwers, too. They might not have realized it, but Jesus saved them, too...from themselves, from their own deadly zeal, that kind of zeal that keeps us from seeing that each and every one of us is dependent on God's mercy. In the words of St. Paul, who was as zealous as they come, we are all sinners saved by grace: the woman caught in adultery, her missing partner, the crowds so willing to exact deadly punishment, and even the Pharisees intent on snaring Jesus.

*Amazing grace, how sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me...*

I have been to a few church services, or retreats, or gatherings where that word “wretch” was changed to a more innocuous lyric (“Amazing grace how sweet the sound that saved a *soul* like me...”) meant, I’m assuming, to come across as less judgmental, less negative, less disapproving. We don’t like to think of ourselves as “wretches,” per se. Imperfect, yes! Misguided at times, okay! Or, our favorite disclaimer, “I’m only human!” But “wretch” is going a bit far. In an effort to counter the excesses of previous generations who attempted to convince us of our...what’s the Calvinist doctrine?...our “total depravity” and scare us into heaven by preaching sermons about sinners in the hands of an angry God, some well-meaning redactors have tried to walk us back from words like “wretch.” No need to pour on the guilt and shame.

But that isn’t really what wretch means. The word *wretch*, from the Old English, originally meant one who was living in exile, a wanderer, a stranger, and how many of us have not felt at one time or another—or maybe even most of the time—that we are not at home, we are not where we belong, and maybe, like the prodigal son, we are the very ones who have taken ourselves away to that far off land, alone and estranged? At some time or another, one way or

another, we have all been there—that far off land, that place of exile and estrangement, of our own making or imposed upon us.

*Prone to wander, I can feel it,
Wandering from the fold of God..*

The biblical word for it is “sin.” *Hamartia*, in Greek. Literally it means “missing the mark,” like an arrow that goes astray. In contrast to the Pharisees and much of the popular thinking of his time (and maybe our own), Jesus didn’t define sin as impurity or contamination, but as being lost—like a sheep, a coin, a prodigal child. And we all get lost. Some of us are lost in outright sin—things we *know* are wrong but do them anyway. Some of us are lost in the wilderness of addiction, or illness, or misfortune. And some of us are lost in the dangerous delusion that our so-called “lesser” sins make us different from those wretches over there, to the extent that they’d pick up a stone to prove it.

That day there, outside the temple, in the fraught silence that surrounded Jesus as he wrote in the dirt, this is sound that met their ears [*drop rock*]. It is the sound of mercy. Not only mercy for that unfortunate woman; but mercy also for those who, in the fervor of their righteousness, were teetering on the verge of a far greater exile. Little did they know it, but Jesus saved more than one life that day. [*Pick up heart shaped rock*]

Here's my heart, O take and seal it, seal it for your very own.

Amen.