

“Love Forgives and Starts Anew”

Sermon by Oby Ballinger

Second Sunday in Lent

Edina Morningside Community Church; February 25, 2018

John 8:2-11

Early in the morning [Jesus] came again to the temple. All the people came to him and he sat down and began to teach them. The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery; and making her stand before all of them, they said to him, “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?” They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, “Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground. When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders; and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. Jesus straightened up and said to her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” She said, “No one, sir.” And Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.”

One of the things I love about being a pastor is the variety of very different things I am able to do over the course of a week. I am by turns a worship planner, pastoral caregiver, staff supervisor, building coordinator, teacher, preacher, digital evangelist, community representative, public advocate, and even a periodic email-answerer! This Christian calling—for everyone and not just pastors—invites us to use every possible opportunity we have to show Christ-like mercy and transformative justice, both within and beyond our congregation.

So it is that on Thursday this week, I found myself at a table with other Christian and Muslim clergy, talking with a gubernatorial candidate here in Minnesota. The faithful network ISALAH—of which we are a part—has reached out to governor, auditor, and other statewide candidates to invite them for a screening with ISALAH’s clergy leadership team. More than a conversation about specific policy proposals, we’ve asked to get a sense of how their values, morality, and decision-making process line up with the biblical ethic of loving God with heart, soul, mind and strength, and loving the neighbor as oneself. I’m grateful to say that governor candidates from both major parties have responded to the call, and I’ve been in on several of those conversations. Since ISALAH does not and will not endorse candidates, these have been uncommon conversations that reach deeper than mere vote-getting and electioneering. The best part is when candidates move past their stump speeches and start to get real.

One moment from our Thursday conversation remains in my heart. The assembled clergy were talking with a candidate about several of his past votes, which seemed to stand in contrast to loving God, neighbor and self. In an unguarded moment, the candidate said, “Look, I’ve cast thousands upon thousands of votes, but everywhere I go in Minnesota, these three or four are the only ones that people talk about. I’ve had plenty of time to second-guess myself, to learn, and to wish I’d done something else, but I have to ask: what’s the place for redemption here?” The religious professionals around the room may have been startled to find ourselves in the place of the Pharisees, “testing him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him.”

We’ve seen this morning how Jesus responds when faced with a similar situation, put in a position of judgment over one who had apparently committed wrong. He considers the evidence that the Pharisees present against the woman, but then rather than playing into their game he bends down and writes on the ground. We don’t have any idea what he might have written, but I like to think that perhaps he wrote a theme that shows up regularly in Hebrew scriptures: “God is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.” He stands up and suggests that those who are like God (without sin) cast the first stone of judgment, then he hunches over again. When he arises a second time, he is alone

with the woman who had been accused. All those who stood in the place of judgment against her had faced their own sinfulness, and had left with a new recognition of their own flaws. Instead of judging the woman himself, Jesus holds out for her the possibilities for mercy, forgiveness, and second chances. Rebirth and renewal are possible, so he urges her to go forward and have a new life, sinning no longer. The scene from Scripture asks us alongside Jesus: “What’s the place for redemption here?”

Certainty can be so daunting sometimes, can’t it? And when righteous conviction about one’s own cause becomes so hardened that it eclipses the possibility of connecting with another in her humanity, it becomes unchristian, as Jesus himself shows. Perhaps this is why I find myself skeptical of zealots in every form. I shy away from shrill voices clamoring for a certain dogma, doctrine or decree, even (especially) those with whom I happen to agree. If any of us is so unwilling to recognize the possibility that we might be wrong and another right, we’ve placed ideology above humanity, and created an idol of our own righteousness. We have only to look at current debates about immigration, politics, or free speech on college campuses to see how a tendency to judgment can push us into communities of like minds—isolated, suspicious and hostile to those who disagree.

That’s what’s heartening about the conversations we’ve been hearing this week around gun laws in this country. We seem to maybe have turned a corner from the self-righteous hold-your-ground certainty into the new possibilities of compromise or a middle ground. Florida Republicans (including the governor) have been critiquing past inaction by administrations and leaders of both parties. Florida Democrats are saying that perhaps we don’t have to insist on an assault weapons ban right now in order to do something meaningful about gun violence. Students are taking the lead, saying “we don’t necessarily have all answers, the right policy solutions for mental health, weapon access, but please, for God’s sake, do something”! By God’s mercy, people are hearing, and possibilities are becoming opened. Even the most fearful voices at the top of the National Rifle Association have quietly signaled to their sympathizers that now may be a time to accommodate changing laws rather than resist at every turn. What’s the possibility for redemption here?

No doubt there’s a lot of window dressing and political posturing. No doubt some gun advocates are waiting for the news media to move on, any day now. We’ll see where it goes from here, but I’m heartened by the possibility that there may be some redemption to the sickening destruction of God’s image in human form every time guns are put to violent use against others or against self.

What it’s taking to rattle the status quo battle between sides entrenched on this issue for decades has been a willingness to consider the possibility that they might be wrong. That there might be a way forward which doesn’t demand “my way or the highway”. I like the way that Yehuda Amichai puts this in a poem called [“The Place Where We Are Right”](#):

From the place where we are right
Flowers will never grow
In the spring.

The place where we are right
Is hard and trampled
Like a yard.

But doubts and loves
Dig up the world
Like a mole, a plow.
And a whisper will be heard in the place
Where the ruined
House once stood.

Jesus shows us what it means to dig up the hardened lines between Pharisee and sinner, calling the former to consider his own sins, and telling the latter to be free of hers, to start anew. What are the legalisms that continue to tempt us, to harden our hearts against mercy? Can you think of a time when you've been wrong about somebody or something? What have you held against someone long past its due date? When has forgiveness and mercy felt impossible to show? That may be what we're called to consider today. What does it look like to practice—as a church—the ways of Jesus here, holding out the possibilities for redemption? Seeking common ground even in places that are hard? Trusting God to be the judge and doing our part to find common humanity across our deadly division? The model of Jesus is different than judging, recognizing that we never have the full truth. Instead, we are called to show mercy and love, because where there is love, God is.

One other scrap of poetic language around this theme (and perhaps poetry does a better job than prose at escaping the drive to certainty) comes from the ancient mystic and poet [Rumi](#):

Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing,
there is a field. I will meet you there.
When the soul lies down in that grass,
the world is too full to talk about
language, ideas, even the phrase *each other*
doesn't make any sense.

By the power of God in Jesus Christ, “othering” finds its limit here, and in Jesus each “other” becomes “one who bears the face of God”. So when we leave church today, when we carry this Christian vocation, message and identity into the world, go to the green fields beyond places of rightness and wrongness, places of mercy and soft earth rather than hardness of heart. God, make it so, we pray. Amen.