

Sermon Series: “Embracing Forgiveness”–Lord of Life Lutheran, Westfield, IN—7/8/07

Title: “Beyond Forgiveness: Drop the Rock”

Text: Philemon 1

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Today’s sermon is based on a story from the Gospel of John about a woman caught up in a plot to discredit Jesus. It contains the familiar story line, “if anyone is without sin, throw the first stone.” She is forced into a mock trial by a group of so-called righteous church leaders, called Pharisees, and publicly humiliated with accusations of adultery. The plot has been introduced by the drama presentation we just saw. The story provides a glimpse of God’s wonderful mercy through his Son Jesus and the forgiveness that is ours through Him. How he values each human life, no matter their circumstances. They say a picture is worth a thousand words, so I would like to you to see a video clip of the story as well (run video).

Complete text of the Gospel, “But Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. At dawn he appeared again in the temple courts, where all the people gathered around him, and he sat down to teach them. The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group and said to Jesus, “Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?” They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him. But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, “If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her.” Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground. At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. Jesus straightened up and asked her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” “No one, sir,” she said. “Then neither do I condemn you,” Jesus declared. “Go now and leave your life of sin.” (John 8:1-11)

Your Bible may contain an interesting sidebar to this story. Some Bibles footnote these verses, stating they are not found in the earliest dated handwritten copies of the Gospel of John and were probably not in John's original writing. The original of course has been lost. What are we to make of this? Most commentaries on John's Gospel suggest the story was retold often by Jesus' followers and it was such a good story, it was eventually "copied and pasted" so to speak into later handwritten copies. Does this cast doubt on its validity? By no means! Did you see or hear anything uncharacteristic of Jesus? Are the words not divinely inspired? Remember these words from 2nd Peter about how the Bible came to be "holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit." To me it demonstrates the extent to which God went to ensure everything important for our salvation was included in the Bible.

Many times throughout the four Gospels we read about the Pharisees attempts to discredit Jesus and do away with him. After all he was messing everything up, literally turning the tables upside down on the religion of the day. We are told plainly here what their motives were. They made a case using an obscure law from one of the Books of Moses. It's found in Leviticus 20:10, "If a man commits adultery with another man's wife, with the wife of his neighbor, both the adulterer and the adulteress must be put to death." The Pharisees thought if Jesus said "no, don't stone her" then it would appear he was ignoring the law and condoning adultery. He would lose credibility with his followers, including those he was teaching that day. If Jesus said, "yes, stone her" then he could get in trouble with the Roman government, because as a conquered nation the Jews had no authority to carry out a death sentence. The Pharisees thought they had set the perfect trap.

Their thinking was flawed though. You've probably caught one of the flaws as I read the law. They had only partially applied the law. Where was the adulterous man? Right? He was to be stoned to death as well. And where were the witnesses? Another flaw in their thinking

was, like some of our own laws on the books, laws have been forgotten or they prohibit behaviors that have become more socially acceptable and the law is no longer enforced. This was the case with the law they were quoting. It had gotten to the point where the death penalty was no longer applied. Adultery was still forbidden and we know from the Sixth Commandment that it violates God's commandment and Jesus would not condone it. Jesus said elsewhere, "I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished (Matthew 5:18).

I'm sensitive to those here today that have had past indiscretions and are feeling uncomfortable or guilty as I speak. The fact is, everyone here ought to be feeling guilty about now for breaking the Sixth Commandment, if you consider that even thoughts of sexual desires outside the marriage relationship condemns us. As we are going through this lesson today, keep in mind the end of the story. Jesus' primary purpose in this event was to take away this woman's shame and restore her life. Jesus said to the woman, "Then neither do I condemn you." Remember these words from Romans also, "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1). Good words to commit to memory.

There's another question that begs to be asked in this encounter with Jesus. What was Jesus writing on the ground with his finger? Was he just doodling as some do on paper, as they listen to someone else talking? This is an art form for some. I think we know Jesus well enough to rule out doodling, Jesus had a purpose for everything he did. If not doodling then what? I ran across this verse in the book of Exodus, when God gave the Ten Commandments the first time to Moses, which I found interesting. "When the LORD finished speaking to Moses on Mount Sinai, he gave him the two tablets of the Testimony, the tablets of stone inscribed by the finger (emphasis added) of God." (Exodus 31:18)

Some commentaries on this event suggest Jesus may have had the following verse in mind from Jeremiah and was writing the names of the accusers in the dust. “O LORD, the hope of Israel, all who forsake you will be put to shame. Those who turn away from you will be written in the dust because they have forsaken the LORD, the spring of living water.” (Jeremiah 17:13) One commentary I read went so far as to say that as Jesus wrote, the accusers’ sins were recounted in a supernatural way on the rocks they held, like a modern day cell phone “text message”. Only God knows for sure, but no matter how it happened, the Holy Spirit brought to mind the accusers’ sins and convicted them before God. Their plan was contemptible and worse yet they cared nothing about this woman’s disgrace. We are told in the text the older ones dropped their rocks first. Perhaps years earlier they had heard the Jeremiah verse I just read and remembered. Certainly they had the most sins to recall because they had lived the longest. I know in my own case, age has allowed for more time to reflect on past wrongs and what the consequences have been. Not to linger in regret, but to better appreciate God’s gift of grace and forgiveness.

The Pharisees always prided themselves in their own self-righteousness, or at least they thought they were righteous for having kept the Pharisaical Laws, over 600 of them. How could anyone even remember that many laws? In any event, both the Pharisees, by their malicious intent, and the woman caught in adultery were guilty of sins against God and their neighbor and all deserved a death sentence. Remember these words from Romans, “For the wages (or consequences) of sin is death.” (Romans 6:23) All were victims of the sinful nature of mankind, the result of the devil’s scheming in the Garden of Eden. Not one of them could claim righteousness of their own.

We remember well the recent events of April 16, 2007, at Virginia Tech in Blacksburg, Virginia, when a lone gunman went on a rampage killing 32 people before turning the gun on

himself. A lesser-known fact about the Virginia Tech campus is what has come to be called “hokie stones”. Many of the buildings are built from this rough quarried gray limestone, dubbed hokie stone. According to the Virginian-Pilot newspaper, within two days of the carnage, a semi-circle of 32 of these hokie stones was placed at the edge of the Drillfield on campus. According to her later interview, that night, Virginia Tech hokie Katelynn L. Johnson, stood counting the rocks and when she got to 32, she said she “just lost it.” “I broke down.” “I was seething.” “I remember saying, how could people be so mean?” She wasn’t speaking of the gunman, but the people that had placed the 32 stones. She and her boyfriend Jim Keane decided to anonymously add one more stone, one for Seung-Hui Cho, the man responsible for the worst mass shooting in modern American history. The added stone drew criticism from people who found it unthinkable to honor a killer’s memory beside his 32 victims. The stone was removed as anonymously as it was added.

Katelynn went on to say, “To see this community turn on one of its own no matter what he did is heartbreaking to me.” “If we’re a community, we’re a community.” If we’re a family, we’re a family.” “You can’t pick and choose your family”, she said. After learning of the stone’s removal, she said, “We lost 33 Hokies that day, not 32.” “Who am I to judge who has value and who doesn’t?” She added, “I am not in that position.” “Are you?”

Whether Katelynn was right or wrong for adding the stone, amid all the hurt and grieving, I don’t know. One thing I do know is Katelynn understood the value of human life, no matter what that person had done. She understood that we are all connected in community and the pain of one ought to be felt by another. She understood that we are all victims of the depravity of mankind in a fallen world. There were no innocent victims. I’m not saying that anyone deserved to die that day, but because of sin we will all one day die. Death is evidence of sin. And yes, we learned later the young man was teased, taunted, and ridiculed by fellow

students and failed to get the help he needed. And yes, the devil held him hostage. Is this occasion all that different from the events of today's sermon text?

My question to you is how many stones did Jesus count that day on the campus of Virginia Tech, 32 or 33? I think you know the answer. He was the shepherd that left 99 sheep to find the one. Yes, he was there in the midst of the chaos and for whatever reason, he chose not to stop it. He was there to grieve with the families of those that died, just as he did when his friend Lazarus died. We don't know what he said to those students that day before they died or even what he may have said to Seung-Hui Cho before he pulled the trigger on himself. One thing is for certain, he wasn't doodling on the ground. It seems likely he would have said the same thing he said to the woman in our story, "Then neither do I condemn you." And out of the ashes of death, he brings forth life, eternal life for all those who put their trust in him and accept his forgiveness.

Modern day Jews follow an age-old custom when visiting a Jewish grave site to place a single stone on the monument. Rabbi's explain the tradition dates from the time when mounds of stone were used as grave markers and as visitors add stones to the mound, they honor the dead and continually build a monument to them. When I first read about this, it didn't make sense to me until I remembered that most Jews do not believe in a resurrection, despite many references to it in their Bible, the Old Testament. In the Old West, people would heap up stones to make sure the dead remained buried, preventing wild animals from carrying the body away. As a believer in Christ and the Resurrection, it's a more fitting witness to place flowers on a grave, to commemorate the living. To look forward to rising to new life when Jesus returns.

To me rocks are a symbol of death and in our story today, they very well could have been instruments of death, or dead stones. Thrown from the hands of self-righteousness men. Men who needed to be shown the "log in their own eye", as Jesus spoke of in Matthew. There was

only one self-righteous man there that day. Only one man that was without sin and had the right to throw the first stone. That was Jesus. Instead he chose to place a living stone on the woman that day, his own righteousness, to take her guilt and shame away. She became a living monument to testify to the saving power of Jesus, the Savior of the world. Peter put it this way "As you come to him, the living Stone, rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him, you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For in Scripture it says: "See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame." (1st Peter 2:4-6)

In a practical sense, what does it look like to be living stones offering spiritual sacrifices? First of all we "drop the rock" of self-righteousness and admit that we are sinful human beings in love with ourselves more than God or anyone else. No one person is better than the next. Each is equally sinful and each is equally loved by God, he makes no distinction. Second, we take an honest look at ourselves and say, you know there are some motives or some actions in my life right now that just don't line up with God. Maybe you walked all over someone at work to prove a point or make a deal. Maybe you get caught up in male chauvinist remarks in the workplace. Maybe you used harsh words with your spouse or child. Maybe you copied answers off your friend's test or lied to your teacher to avoid embarrassment. Maybe you harbor angry or jealous thoughts toward a co-worker, neighbor or even someone at church. Then let us humble ourselves and pray to Jesus, "I'm sorry, please forgive me." Then say "please take those sinful feelings away, help me to make amends, and change the way I look at that person." Then hear the words of Jesus, "Then neither do I condemn you."

There's one more thing and it's easy to miss the part at the end of today's sermon text when Jesus declared, "Go now and leave your life of sin." (John 8:11) We often forget that part,

we confess and receive forgiveness and then go on our merry way. Our prayer ought to end with “By the power of your name, change my heart from the inside out.” We can’t accept his forgiveness and continue to be the same person we always were. It doesn’t work that way. As we receive Jesus and live in the freedom of his forgiveness, by the power of his resurrection, we cross over from death to life, the grave can no longer hold us no matter how many stones are heaped on us in life. God speaking through the Ezekiel, put it this way, “For I will take you out of the nations; I will gather you from all the countries and bring you back into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone (emphasis added) and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.”

(Ezekiel 36:24-27)

He “radically changes” our life forever and that’s when we begin to leave our life of sin and are able to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. We are able to see our neighbor or co-worker differently, not as an antagonist or someone out to get us, but someone who needs our help. We are motivated to forgive each other because God forgives us. The Apostle Paul put it this way, “Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.” (Colossians 3:13) We are able to control our tongue, not using it to tear down, but to build up. We are able to choose a path away from sin and one that will remedy a wrong. So drop the rock and receive the “Rock of Ages”. Let the “Rock of our Salvation” be your strength and guide. Build your house on the Rock, where you are shielded from the rocks of life, because he says to you right now "Then neither do I condemn you."