

“Second Chances”

a sermon by

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Text: “And Jesus said, ‘Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again’” (John 8:11).

The Scripture from which I have just read is one of the most familiar stories in all of the New Testament. It is the story of the “woman taken in adultery.” It is a powerful story, one that presents Jesus in a remarkable way. It is also an entrapment story, one of those stories that are familiar in the gospels by which the enemies of Jesus try to place Jesus in an unfavorable light.

In this story, the Scribes and Pharisees bring to Jesus a woman who was taken in the act of adultery. The Law of Moses was quite clear about this. A woman (and a man for that matter) who was proven guilty of this offense was sentenced to death (see Leviticus 20:10 and Deuteronomy 22:21-22). The enemies of Jesus brought her to him to see what Jesus would do. If he said to set her free, Jesus would be accused of leniency to sinners and in violation of the Mosaic Law. If he were to demand for her the punishment required by the law, he would risk losing favor with the people.

But, as so often happens in the New Testament, Jesus responded in a way that no one predicted. When first questioned about this offense, he said nothing but proceeded to kneel in the dirt and write something in the sand. When pressed further about his response, he stood, and said to her accusers, “Let the person without sin cast the first stone.” One by one, her accusers left. Jesus was now alone with the woman. “Woman,” he said, “Has no one condemned you?” She said, “No.” Jesus replied, “Neither do I. Go your way and sin no more.”

I.

Now, I suspect it goes without saying that this story has always caused a certain amount of trouble in the church. For one thing, the text of this story is uncertain. It is not found in the

earliest manuscripts of the New Testament and does not appear in the Gospel of John until 900 A.D.

Moreover, there is a certain uneasiness that people have with this narrative. The woman was taken in the act of adultery, that is to say she was guilty of a heinous sin. By law she was condemned to be stoned to death. Doesn't this really make Jesus look a bit soft? After all, adultery is a pretty big deal. Many people have wondered whether this text belongs in the Bible or not. So, I think we need to look hard at this text for two very specific reasons.

II.

For one thing, it points us to the heart of the gospel itself, namely, the power of God to forgive sin.

There is nothing more central to the gospel than the conviction that one aspect of the salvation that Jesus came to bring is the forgiveness of sin. The gospel of Jesus Christ is contained in the words of Jesus to a paralyzed man, "Your sins are forgiven" (Mark 2:5). The Apostle Paul stated it more theologically, "Therefore," he wrote, "Since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Romans 5:1).

The word "forgiveness" has many uses in our society. For some it is just a matter of the ordinary living of life. "Mistakes happen," we sometimes say, as if nothing really matters much.

The Bible, however, nowhere regards forgiveness as simple or as the expression of general disposition. The Bible takes sin seriously. Any person who joins the Presbyterian Church has to be prepared to answer the question: "Do you understand yourself to be a sinner, deserving of God's displeasure and lost apart from God's grace?" That is to say, the Christian faith is absolutely certain in its conviction that there is something fundamentally flawed in human nature that apart from God's love in Jesus Christ damns each one of us to eternal destruction.

This element of our lostness is demonstrated in a number of dimensions of our lives: 1) We are sinners, who sin not only in our worst deeds but in our best deeds, which are flawed by our own self-interest. 2) We cannot guarantee the future even when that future involves us on the deepest personal levels of life. 3) We cannot complete our lives by our own efforts. 4) We cannot escape the frustrations and defeat that are present in all our lives. As created and "fallen" human beings we cannot live either in private or public life with serenity, dignity, and poise; apart from the grace of God.

John Leith once observed that the greatest chasm in the New Testament is not between the rich and the poor, the powerful and the oppressed, male and female, or the free and the enslaved. The greatest chasm is between those who believed that they were righteous and those who knew they were sinners. That is why Jesus said that "the lame, the blind, and halt would enter first into the kingdom of God." They know that life is broken. But the gospel is hidden from those of us who in our own self-righteousness cannot see the sorrow and tragedy in the worst of life. It is hidden from those of us who believe that hard work and success can earn us a place in heaven.

That is the great power in this story of the “woman taken in adultery.” It is the power of a second chance.

As we come to the beginning of a new year, we all share a sense of optimism and hope about the future. The first Sunday of a new year reminds us of the opportunities that are before us. But it is more than that. It is also a reminder to us of the power of God to free us from the mistakes of the past that decimate us and rob us of any real hope. Many of us can look at the year 2007 and recognize the great difficulties that the year brought. Some of us lost loved ones. Some have experience separation and divorce. Some have lost their jobs. Others are now faced with an illness that threatens their very life.

That is why the gospel of Jesus Christ is particularly relevant for us on this Sunday. It is a reminder of God’s grace that is poured out for us in Jesus Christ that is dependent neither on our goodness or our achievements.

There are two truths that are contained in this particular narrative that are at the heart of our faith. The first is that Jesus can only help those who acknowledge that they are sinners. The second is that only those who know they are sinners, only those who have received mercy, can show mercy.

III.

There is another very powerful message in this narrative in John’s gospel. It speaks not only of the power of forgiveness, but also of the power of a new life. Reinhold Niebuhr once defined God’s grace not only as forgiveness, but as power. That is the impact of the words of Jesus to this woman. When all of the people who had condemned her to death had departed, Jesus asked her, “Has no one condemned you.” (verse 10). And Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you. Go, and sin no more.”

Stanley Hauerwas once described ministers as a “quivering mass of availability.” We are often quick to identify with any hurt, quick to offer a word of forgiveness, quick to justify almost any kind of behavior.

But Jesus did not do this. He told the woman that he did not condemn her. Had that been the only word that Jesus had uttered this would have been a far different narrative. But that was not the final word Jesus spoke. He told her to go and sin no more.

In a little book entitled *Not Every Spirit*, Christopher Morse demonstrates that the early Christians were persecuted not because they believed that Jesus Christ was Lord. They were persecuted because they did not believe that Augustus Caesar was Lord. You see, part of being a Christian is not only what we support but also what we condemn.

When the Confessing Church in Germany gathered in the little town of Barmen, they did so not only to say what they believed. They also gathered to say what they did not believe. In every section of the Barmen Declaration there is a “credimus”— “We believe.” But the “credimus” is also followed by a “damnatis”—“We reject.” Alas, when it came time for the rest

of the German church to say “Nein,” the church had lost the theological means to know that there are some things that must be rejected, as well as the courage to say “No.”

The Apostle Paul once wrote, “If anyone is in Christ, that person is a new creation. The old has passed away. The new has come.”

The gospel of the second chance is the gospel that proclaims to each of us that our sins are forgiven and that by God’s grace we now have the power to live changed lives.

Amen.