

August 10, 2008  
Psalm 145  
John 8:1-11

Set Free  
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In the classical film "The African Queen," the main character, Charlie Allnut says to Rose, the missionary, "A man takes a drop of gin too much once in awhile, it's only human nature." Rose fires back, "Nature, Mr. Allnut, is what we are put in this world to rise above." (Homiletics, July-August 08, pg. 12)

How do we overcome the downward bent of human nature? What does it mean to rise above the messes we encounter and the messes we make? Do we judge others and establish our own purity? Do we preserve tradition at all costs? Do we live and let live – I'm okay, you're okay? After all, everyone does it...

The text in John puts us right in the middle of the tangled web that sin creates. There's the sin of the woman, and the sin of the indignant zealots who were ready to judge her and even more eager to entrap Jesus. Hmmm. Let's get this woman, and let's really get this Jesus guy.

The zealots are on good ground. They refer to the law – it's in black and white, making their case neat and tidy. It is obvious that they are not interested in the purpose of the law or in the spiritual state of the woman, or of whether or not she is penitent. They want "justice" which translates – stone the offender!

How uncomfortable to be caught, to be put on the spot, to be in the wrong. A year ago I heard a siren and saw red lights blinking behind me on the highway and wondered for whom the siren wailed. Behold, it was for me! When the highway patrol officer walked up to the car window, he, as they generally do, asked if I knew how fast I was traveling through the construction zone. I squirmed while musing over his question, and then he informed me both of my speed and the speed limit. Unfortunately they didn't match. And since I was speeding in a construction zone the fines were double.

It seemed like an interminable wait as he took the requisite information and then sauntered back from his car to give me the bottom line. He never smiled, but finally said, "I'm giving you a warning." Whew! But next to me in the car, my wife Betty rolled her eyes that I had once again gotten off. For whatever reason I get warnings but she gets tickets. "Not fair, not just," says she.

I was grateful, truly penitent, and paid better attention to the speed limits after that.

A great deal more was at stake for the woman caught speeding in the adultery zone. Benjamin Franklin once said that "Sin is not hurtful because it is forbidden; it is forbidden because it is hurtful." (Homiletics, J-A, 08 pg. 14). Jesus doesn't take our sins lightly. This isn't an easy off-ramp Jesus overlooking our "taking a drop of gin too much once in awhile." Rather, it is the radical notion of grace: God loving us unconditionally, remaking into the image of that love. Remember Paul's description of God's nature that we marveled at last week? "But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ – by grace you have been saved." (Ephesians 2:5)

One thing is for sure. This woman is “dead in her trespasses” -- she is violating not only her husband, but herself and God. David, caught in the sin of adultery writes, “Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are justified in your sentence, and blameless when you pass judgment.” (Psalm 51:4)

Philip Yancey makes the observation that of all the religions of the world, only Christianity dares to make God’s love unconditional. “The Buddhist eight-fold path, the Hindu doctrine of Kava, the Jewish covenant, and Muslim code of law – each of these offers a way to earn approval.” (What’s So Amazing About Grace? Zondervan, pg. 45) In this text we see the face of God in Jesus, a God who loves sinners, redeems failures, delights in second chances and fresh starts, never tiring of the pursuit of lost sheep, waiting for prodigal children, or rescuing those damaged by life and left on the sides of its paths (Surrender To Love, Benner, pg. 45) No projection of our own image of God would ever create a God like this. In fact, that God could be such a combination of love, mercy and justice, is difficult for us. We have a hard time accepting such love. We want to earn it. And most religious systems, even those within the Christian religion, will help you do just that.

Thomas Aquinas observes that there are three things necessary for our salvation: to know what we ought to believe, to know what we ought to desire, and to know what we ought to do.” (Homiletics J-A, pg. 51) Jesus helps us with all three. God is a God of unconditional love who desires a relationship of love and says “follow me,” showing us what we ought to do -- love God, and our neighbor as ourselves. Exactly what Jesus did for this woman. Her shame and condemnation turned instantly to hope. Jesus extricates her from her sin, granting another chance. The spirit of condemnation and judgment, so common among our transactions in this life, does not come from the Spirit of God. Conviction of wrongdoing – yes. Condemnation – no. Paul put it this way to the Corinthians in his second letter; “For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation and brings no regret, but worldly grief brings death.” (2 Corinthians 7:10)

In the end, God turns out to be far different from what we imagine. After kneeling and writing whatever he did in the sand, Jesus rises as her accusers walk away one by one, saying to her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” “No one, sir,” she said. And Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.” (vs. 11) Jesus’ response fits with what St. Ignatius of Loyola observed of God in his life. Sin is the unwillingness to trust that God is good, that what God wants is my deepest happiness. When I don’t believe that, I’ll do everything not to trust God with my life (why would I trust and love a god who sought to condemn me and catch me doing something wrong?) In fact, I’ll do everything possible to keep my hands on the controls of my life because I think I know better than God what I need for my fulfillment.

That is why coming to terms with such redemption is both easy and hard. Writer Fred Craddock tells the story of his father. “My mother took us to church and Sunday school; my father didn’t go. Sometimes the preacher would call and my father would say, “I know what the church wants. Church doesn’t care about me. Church wants another name, another pledge, another name, another pledge. Right? Isn’t that the name of it? Another name, another pledge.” That’s what he always said. “The church doesn’t care about me. The church wants another name, another pledge.” I guess I heard it a thousand times.

The time he didn’t say it, he was in the Veteran’s Hospital, and he was down to 73 pounds. They’d taken out his throat, and said, “It’s too late.” They put in a metal tube, and x-rays burned him to pieces. I flew in to see him. He couldn’t speak, couldn’t eat. I looked around the room, potted plants and cut flowers on the window sills, a stack of cards 20 inches deep beside his bed. And even that tray where they put

food, if you can eat, on that was a flower. And all these flowers beside the bed, ever card, every blossom, were from people or groups from the church.

He saw me read a card. He could not speak, so he took a Kleenex box and wrote on the side of it a line from Shakespeare. If he had not written this line, I would not tell you this story. "In this harsh world, draw your breath in pain to tell my story."

I said, "What is your story, daddy?" And he wrote, "I was wrong."

What is it that allows us, the Charlies of this world, to rise above our human nature? Unconditional love. Peter's illumination after his denial of Jesus came when he looked into Jesus' eyes and saw that he was still deeply loved. Everything changes about how he saw himself and saw God. He knew he was loved in the midst of his sin and failure.

David Brenner, in an excellent explanation of God's transforming love for us, writes in his book, "Surrender to Love", "Receiving God's embrace of love in the midst of my most profound awareness of my sin cannot help but propel me through self-preoccupation toward more authentic love. The love I feel for God at this point is different from that associated with the first enthusiastic burst of joy. The humbling encounter with the depths of my sin leads to a love for God that is grounded in appreciation for grace. And any genuine encounter with grace has the effect of deepening my love of others." ("Surrender to Love", pg. 99) And the cross is God's eye of love penetrating through the darkness of my sin, calling me upward into relationship with a God who loves me. I don't achieve or earn that. I receive it. It is a gift.

This is what the woman experienced that day and why her accusers did not. Will we walk away from the gaze of Jesus' love into our eyes or will we look into his eyes and allow ourselves to be transformed into the likeness of his love? Indeed, the Psalmist is right. "The Lord upholds all who are falling and raises up all who are bowed down. (Psalm 145:14)

Amen and amen.