January 18, 2015

John 8:1-11

*Jesus’ Grace: Am I Accepted?*

David Elliott

Greenland Hills United Methodist Church

John 8:1-11 New Revised Standard Version

1while Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. 2Early in the morning he came again to the temple. All the people came to him and he sat down and began to teach them. 3The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery; and making her stand before all of them, 4they said to him, “Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. 5Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?” 6They 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. 7When 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.” 8And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground.[[a](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John+8%3A1-11&version=NRSV;NIV#fen-NRSV-26379a)] 9When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders; and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. 10Jesus straightened up and said to her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” 11She said, “No one, sir.”[[b](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John+8%3A1-11&version=NRSV;NIV#fen-NRSV-26382b)] And Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.”]][[c](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John+8%3A1-11&version=NRSV;NIV#fen-NRSV-26382c)]

Will I be accepted? Will I be welcomed? The fear of not being welcomed, of not being accepted- worse, that I may be scorned, cast out, rejected is HUGE. I don’t know if people here will accept me, like me, care to listen to me preach. I am certain I could replace the “I” with “we” and many of you would be in agreement. I DO know this: God’s grace accepts me, God’s grace accepts US, and that is worth celebrating! I do know this: the grace of God through Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit animates me, moves me, enlivens me, and I delight in sharing my experience of God’s grace. Grace accepts us just as we are, “Just as I am”, even with all our flaws, that, YES! God loves me, *even* me! Jesus accepts me, YES! *even* me! Jesus accepts all of us, yes, ALL, of us, you and I- acceptance in love and grace!

The woman in John’s Gospel, she is alone, scared, having been “caught in the act of adultery”. And this on top of the fact she’s a woman, clearly less than a man, much less than the legal scholars, the scribes and Pharisees, less of a status than Jesus even. Now the “law of Moses” in Deuteronomy stated that a woman or a man caught in such a flagrant act, should be taken outside the city walls and stoned to death. The law was clear, unequivocal. The scribes and Pharisees, the interpreters of the law, the guardians of the law, knew this. They bring her to Jesus, in front of the crowd who gathered to hear him teach, and she’s guilty, having been caught in the act! Now these guardians of the law hoped to trap Jesus: perhaps he wouldn’t follow “the law” properly, perhaps they would confound him, Jesus would say nothing, and thus be exposed as a fraud. It’s uncertain of the trap they hoped to spring, but nonetheless they were going to spring it!

So what does Jesus do? After all, all eyes are on him, he’s the center of the drama here, not really the woman, nor the guardians of the law, not the gathered crowd. Jesus is the center here: what will he do? What will he say? And…. he draws on the ground! Astonishing, he scribbles something in the dirt. At this point I imagine the guardians of the law, the self righteous, thought “what a joke this clown is- he knows we’ve got him & he draws in the ground like a silly child!” But then something happens, Jesus STANDS UP, boldly looks the guardians in the eye and says, “Any of you so completely righteous to the law, any of you who has no sin whatsoever, go ahead and cast the first stone!” After all they caught her in the act, so she’s guilty right? So stone her, but only if you have no sin yourself. And then he returned to his earthen artwork, his drawing in the ground.

Well the guardians of the law KNEW the only one without sin, would be God alone, and God’s chosen, the anointed one, the Messiah- they were guilty of sin, some sort of sin, perhaps the same sin as this woman- perhaps they themselves had secretly committed adultery with her in some clandestine place. And they walked away, the oldest first, certainly the most respected, being elders, certainly the most righteous, being seniors, first. The crowds seemed to have dispersed as well. The circus was over. Jesus, and the accused woman, alone.

The woman, probably still scared, wondered, “this man is obviously holy, intelligent, unafraid to challenge the guardians, what will he do to me?” Jesus looks up at her, compassionately, and asks her, “where did your accusers go? They didn’t condemn you?” And she answers him, respectfully, “No they did not Lord”, then Jesus offers her pardon, grace, “neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more”. Jesus accepts this woman, then tells her to go live a healthier, more fulfilling life! In fact in his acceptance of her, he is showing her new life!

I identify with the woman in our story. I received my Masters in Divinity from Perkins School of Theology in 1999. Jim Kirby was Dean when I first arrived. Charles Wood was my systematic theology professor. I struggled throughout seminary. I did a CPE Chaplaincy internship at Methodist Hospital, that ended poorly. The next few years were hard. I struggled with deep depression. I didn’t know where I was to go. I doubted God. I figured my “demons” were too great for God to ever truly love me, much less love myself, and forget about loving others! Any sort of ministry? Oh puhlease- I burned those bridges! Finally I took a job as a security officer, just to keep a roof over my head, food on the table. I still work in this profession. It’s not a glorious means to make a living, but it suffices.

About a year and a half ago I realized I needed to confront the painful dark places in my life. I found a therapist and I liked her. After a few sessions I discovered she received her Masters in Counseling from Dallas Theological Seminary, a far more conservative seminary than Perkins! I tested her theology, her ethical views, and found we disagreed. Yet she provided me a safe, welcoming place to work on my issues, without judgement! We still disagree on some issues of faith, but I find we agree on much, much more. More importantly is the healing & growth I have experienced! Likewise Pastor Kerry has provided me such great, sustaining pastoral care, an ear to hear my pains, and grace & acceptance, no matter how much of a screw up I figured I was. And Greenland Hills- I followed Kerry here from Oak Lawn UMC, but I love this church so much, y’all have welcomed me, loved me, allowed me to teach your children, teach bible study, compose liturgies for worship, and even preach! \*gasp\* Last Christmas Season I finally experienced regeneration of my heart, a rebirth, I truly felt “born again”, I understood, deep within my soul, that God loved me, *yes even me*, even with all my dysfunctions! I came to Kerry & cautiously said, “what if I were to tell you I’ve been ‘born agin’?!?” And her eyes watered up, she placed her hand on her heart, and exclaimed such full support, I was a little taken aback! That phrase “born again” has become such an empty catch phrase, so loaded with negative assumptions, I am somewhat reluctant to use it. Yet use it I do! And I am confirmed in my experience by the fellowship of this church, our pastor, and my therapist! Amen! Glory to God!

Paul writes, in Romans 3:23, “we have all sinned and fallen short of the grace of God”, none of us deserve pardon, grace. And yet, indeed, through the acceptance of Jesus, we are offered pardon, God’s grace! Even though we are “guilty” God pardons us. At the beginning of John’s gospel, we are told “from his fullness we have all received grace upon grace”! Sometimes at night I look up in the sky, seeing all the beautiful stars and I realize the immense beauty & creativity of the universe, a universe created by God over great millennia. And that creative power, that profound love became human in Jesus. I could never measure up to such creative love, but that creative love still accepts me. This loving grace is truly “Amazing Grace”!

In the book we have been studying, What’s the Least I can Believe and still be a Christian, Martin Thielen, writes, “God works full-time offering unconditional love to all human beings…Grace means that in spite of all our flaws, failures, and sins, God dearly loves us and offers us forgiveness.” And that grace, that unconditional love, is fully realized in the life, teachings, death & resurrection of Jesus Christ, as Theilen reminds us, “(a)t his core, Jesus was a man of mercy and grace.” He showed this core to the woman in our story, “neither do I condemn you, go and sin no more”. So while Jesus did not disregard the woman’s sin, he offered her pardon, love in compassion, and grace! He offers us the exact same love, grace, acceptance in spite of our sin, our dysfunctions. He offers us a better way of living, less bound in the chains of legalistic fear, and more in the freedom of a fulfilling life! In fact in our story, Jesus offers a radical reinterpretation of the law: equally offering a new life to all the characters in the drama: the scribes, Pharisees, and the woman! He sees all as equal in their sin, and offering them, equally, new life! Jesus reminds us, in Matthew’s Gospel, “I have not come to abolish the law, but to fulfill it!”

The radical fulfillment of the law, the new life Jesus offers us, the grace of God, the pardon offered to us is such a great gift! So worthy of accepting, because *we* are accepted first! John Wesley believed our acceptance of the gift of grace, our acceptance of Jesus’ acceptance of us, is our justification! We are regenerated, born anew, born again, justified and sanctified by our faith in this grace and acceptance! We are then on a journey of perfection in love, of holy living: go and sin no more, love your neighbor as God has loved you, offer the same pardon, grace, & love you have received!

This perfection in love is best exemplified by a quote from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., “everybody can be great, because everybody can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. You don't have to make your subject and your verb agree to serve. You don't have to know about Plato and Aristotle to serve. You don't have to know Einstein's theory of relativity to serve. You don't have to know the second theory of thermodynamics in physics to serve. You only need a heart full of grace, a soul generated by love.” A heart full of grace, a soul generated by love!

We live out hearts full of grace, souls generated by love in prayer, bible study (both personal and in fellowship with others, such as on Tuesday night!) serving our neighbors, serving our communities, serving our church. We live out grace, love, acceptance, by accepting others just as they are, even with their flaws, their sins. And we serve them. We see them as our equals, worthy of love, grace, pardon even.

So much of our society is built on the idea of retributive justice: you do something wrong & the law will punish you; but grace asks us to be restorative in our justice: recuperating victim, offender & the community to wholeness. As people saved by grace, we should extend said grace to the poor, the outcast, those oppressed by bigotry and injustice, the lost and forsaken! The grace we offer to those, whoever they are, no matter their circumstances, in fact often *because of* their circumstances, is merely an imitation of the huge grace God offers us! The more I journey on this path of perfection in love, love for myself, love of God, the more compassion I have towards others, the more I am reconnected to struggles for equality and justice. The reasons I came to seminary in the first place. I celebrate this today and thank this church for celebrating with me! From the grace, love and acceptance I have received, I offer to you- from the grace, love, and acceptance we have received, through Christ, let us offer to others! Let us pray.