

Loving God...Changing Lives: Lost and Found

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church, Rev. Dr. Anne Fisher

March 1, 2020; John 8:1-11

Today we are tackling the difficult subject of human trafficking. Although this subject is usually not brought up in casual conversation or polite company, it is something that all of us as followers of the risen Christ need to feel outrage about what is happening to our sisters and brothers. As Christians, we do not shy away from the difficult subjects. Jesus in his actions and words tells us that people matter and every person is loved. We cannot be like the ones who left the Samaritan bruised and battered on the side of the road because he or she wasn't one of us. Today in our Loving God...Changing Lives series, the scripture is about the story of a woman who was caught in a crime which was punishable by execution. Let us listen for Jesus' response to the situation. **John 8:1-11:**

¹...while 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. 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." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again."

This is the Word of the Lord; Thanks be to God.

They were aching for a confrontation, those scribes and Pharisees. They wanted to show those people gathering around this rabbi in front of the

temple, that he did not follow the law that they all served. This was their opportunity. A woman, a nobody, caught in the act! A salacious crime that every law-abiding man would support in meting her punishment.

Jesus was drawing people away from the temple leaders with his lessons about God's Kingdom and they needed him to stop. Imagine that a commotion begins off to the side of Jesus and grows. They bring their catch, a woman caught with another man. They make her stand before them all. Women were not to be seen in such gatherings at the temple but she has already broken the rules of behavior so let her suffer the shame. No one will come to her defense. Her husband most likely is leading the outrage. The man (You know that adultery is not a solo act,) is most likely hiding in the shadows looking the other way. The crowd will certainly turn from Jesus and support the law in this case. How do you uphold society if a woman does not stay true to her husband? How can you be sure your progeny is yours, if there is faithlessness? The leaders had a sure case in front of Jesus. If he sides with the law, the crowds will follow them to execute her and lose interest in what Jesus is telling them. If he shows compassion to this woman, then he will be compromised, as he will be disregarding the laws of Moses. She is guilty. No one is speaking up for her. So, Jesus how are you going to handle this one?

Let's pause for a moment. This passage from the Bible is a story without a story. We have no back story about this woman. We do not know who she is and from where she came. We do not know the circumstances that brought her to this moment. We do not know what happens after he sends her on her way. What we do know is that her guilt is not disputed. We do know this woman is being used as an object to test Jesus in front of his listeners and to expose him for a fraud. We do know that her life changes because of her encounter with Jesus.

Jesus what do you do with this one? As the anticipation of the crowd grows, imagine the gossip rippling thorough. That is somebody's wife. Who was she with? You have all heard it before. Jesus is not part of the gossip. He leans down and starts writing in the dust. As people are murmuring of what Jesus will do and craning their necks to see, he writes as if he has all the time in the world. He does not plead her case or make

her an object of his lesson. He removes himself from the drama being played out. What are you going to do Jesus? The crowd joins in and pleads for a ruling, an answer, from this teacher who knows God's ways. With that, he looks up and speaks. The first one to condemn this woman with a stone is the one who has never done anything wrong or unseemly, anyone who has not committed a sin. Who will that be? They must have looked at each other. They know each other. At that moment they were confronted with their own humanity, their own vulnerability, their own flaws. First, the Scribes and Pharisees leave, the curious leave, the ones drawn to the drama of the act leave. The people who were listening to Jesus' teachings leave. The disciples and friends leave. All who remain are the woman and Jesus. Now, because of the love of God, the woman's life changes.

Did you notice how Jesus treats the woman? Jesus does not lecture or correct her but tells her that He does not condemn her and to go and change. Sin no more. The dignity, the love he shows by treating her with respect, is in such contrast to what has just happened. In this passage the remarkable elevation from a humiliated criminal ready to face her death from a self-righteous group to a person who has another chance to make it right. Isn't that what we expect for ourselves?

This woman represents the millions of men and woman who have been at the mercy of others who hold more power. This woman, whose story we do not know, represents the millions of voiceless women and men who find themselves in situations beyond their control for reasons that are unknown to us. This woman is a prop in a confrontation with Jesus. She represents the millions of men and women who through a matter of survival make choices that take away their autonomy and freedom. This woman represents countless of people who have run from terrible situations only to run toward a darker and more destructive path. Every person has a story. For some, it is a story that seems the only option at the time. A story of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. A story of those whom they trusted betraying them. In their stories, their dignity and their fullness of life has been stripped away. It is happening near and far from us. The nameless and countless are being used as commodities for cheap labor, for pleasure and for the gain of others.

Jesus does not give us a lecture on it. He does not explain all the reasons that this should not exist in Palestine in the first century or in the United States in the 21st century. But Jesus turns the tables. Jesus acts by having the accusers look into their very own twisted hearts and he acts by treating the woman with a dignity that she had little known until that moment.

So, what do we do? Do we follow Jesus not only by saying the words but seeking out those who may be lost and those who have no one to speak up for them? Do we treat all with the dignity as children of God? Can we restore the ones who have had generations of judgment and assumptions loaded upon them? That is our challenge -- first to see the panhandler, the young man lurking in the shadows, the non-English speakers fleeing the dangers of their homeland or the girl with such a bright promise for a future who has run off only to lose herself. These are the people who Jesus finds and shows that God's love can change lives and their stories can be made right.

Jesus, in a tender moment after the chaos of accusations and the blood thirst of punishment dissipate, is with the nameless woman. What a powerful moment. Who is here to condemn you? She cautiously looks around and says "Sir, no one." I would imagine Jesus would then quietly, gently say, "Neither do I. Go and sin no more."

Did you hear what he said? A convicted criminal that by the Law of Moses would be stoned to death. A horrible way to die. In the kingdom of God, the message that Jesus is sharing does not have room for condemnation that is unjust. but he kingdom of God has room for all who gather near -- the named and the unnamed.

What do we do for all the woman and men in situations similar to hers? How can we be part of their stories? How do we right the wrongs, give hope and sustenance to those who have no name or voice in our world of greed, corruption and unbridled power? Let us draw close to Jesus to discover our part of their stories. Thanks be to God Amen.