

“HE NEVER SAID IT WOULD BE EASY:
III – ‘LET THE ONE WHO IS WITHOUT SIN CAST THE FIRST STONE . . .’”

Karen F. Bunnell
Elkton United Methodist Church
May 14, 2017

John 8:1-11

I was doing some reading on line this week when I came across a phrase that made me really unhappy – cruel Christianity. Cruel Christianity. I had never heard it before, but it was coined by a man who has watched over the years and seen Christians being cruel to others – mostly by trying to tell them what they were doing wrong, how they weren’t following the rules, how they didn’t qualify to be in the church, and well, frankly, how they were going to go to hell.

It made me incredibly sad to read that, and while I don’t see that kind of behavior around here too much, I’m sad to say that I know it goes on all the time. Why just the other day there were Christians on the campus of the University of Delaware carrying horrible signs pronouncing judgment on people they deem sinners.

And we’ve seen that over the years with groups from Westboro Baptist Church who show up at, well, for one, funerals of military personnel who have died in the service of our country, and hold up horrible signs there too.

And while we don’t think those things represent us, I’m sad to report that many in the world do. Many people get their impression of people of faith, and Christians in particular, from those kind of people who are in the news – and as a result, they want no part of this Jesus they talk about.

In a compelling book I’ve told you about before entitled *They Like Jesus But Not the Church*, author Dan Kimball says that one of the reasons people don’t come to church is because their perception is that people in the church are judgmental and negative. They get that perception from things like I’ve mentioned, but also from reading about how we in the church not only fight outside, but fight within our churches and denominations – and sadly, that includes our own.

So they see what that author called “cruel Christianity” and want no part of it, or the Jesus we profess, if he’s behind it all.

Sadly, this kind of thing has been happening way before our time. Sadly, we actually see it in today’s Gospel lesson, where a crowd stands by watching “religious” people condemning a woman caught in adultery and calling for her death. That’s bad enough, but the savvy ones in the crowd, saw something even more – they saw the religious leaders – the Scribes and the Pharisees using her to

trap Jesus. Oh sure, they totally disapproved of what she had done, but that paled in comparison to how much they hated Jesus, and wanted to trap him and get him into some serious trouble.

So that's what the crowd gathered that day saw – they saw, well, cruelty. In no way did they see love, mercy, grace or anything resembling it from their religious leaders. It was all cruelty and judgment.

How incredibly sad. Well, Jesus saw right through them, and refused to play their game. He refused to take the bait they were dangling, which was designed to get him in trouble no matter what he said.

Instead, he turned the tables. They wanted Jesus to judge her and condemn her to death – instead, he turned to them and said, “Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.”

Oh, my, that was not what they expected and it surely struck home, taking the wind out of their sails. Apparently Jesus' words went straight to their hearts, because the scripture say that, one by one, they turned and walked away.

Now, imagine being a person in the crowd. Imagine being that woman! Two minutes before she was being utterly humiliated, her sins laid out before the world, her very life on the line – and now, her accusers have silently walked away, and she stands face to face with Jesus, the one who, for the moment, has spared her life.

He begins to speak. “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you? Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.”

Oh my, what a witness to the power of love and grace. No, Jesus didn't ignore her sin, he acknowledged it and told her not to sin again – but – he did that **after** he offered her grace. He, like the Scribes and Pharisees, could have been the morality police, but to Jesus, **she** was more important than her sin. He did not identify her by her sin, her identity to Jesus was a beloved child of God, who, yes, had done something wrong, but **first**, she was a beloved child of God – and he treated her that way.

Oh friends, that's what the world wants to see, that's what the world needs to see from us – we who claim to be children of God and followers of Jesus Christ. They need to see that we see others first as beloved children of God, not sinners. They need to see us care about others instead of trying to label them. They need to see us opening doors to people instead of trying to keep them out because they don't meet our standards. They need to see us being less judgmental and more graceful – grace filled!

I think that little children's book that we read this morning showed so clearly what it's like to live in an atmosphere of judgment. Poor little Punchinello wanted desperately to live up to others' expectation, to be praised and recognized and get those stars. But the world kept judging him and putting dots all over him and it

demoralized him. Because of those dots and that judgment, he had a hard time remembering who he really was – a creature worthy simply because of the One who had created him and loved him no matter what – gifted in the eyes of the world or not.

Friends, all of us are like that woman in the Gospel story, and all of us are like Punchinello. We sin, we fall short. And we beat ourselves up over that, and so do others. We'd all like to live better lives, we all want the attention that comes through admiration, we'd like to be covered with stars for being good – we yearn for that. And too often, we let the need for recognition and praise take us off track, focusing entirely on ourselves and not others. And too often, the judgment that gets heaped on us by others – the dots – sends us into downward spirals of depression and self-loathing.

Until we experience the grace of God freely given – the grace that says “I don't love your sin, but I love you. Go and sin no more.”

God's amazing grace poured out in Christ Jesus.

Oh friends, I think that's the kind of grace Jesus wants us to pass on in his name too. Sure, sometimes it will be hard, really hard – but Jesus never said it would be easy! Instead of being cruel, condemning Christians, Jesus calls us to be loving, grace-filled Christians – leaving the judging up to God.

I will never forget – oh, it was probably 35 years ago or so – I was volunteering at the Emmanuel Dining Room in Wilmington. It was my first time there, and it was located in a pretty rough section of the city. I went early to get things ready, and at one point had some time to sit down with a couple of the women who had come there to get a meal. They looked at me, saw my nametag, which had my first name on it and the name of the church I was from – Asbury United Methodist Church – and I could tell they were wary. They were rough looking. It was clear they hadn't bathed in a while, their clothes were tattered, their language pretty earthy – and they didn't clean it up on my behalf.

They looked at me – I wasn't dressed up, but I had clean, nice clothes on and my hair looked nice – and I guess they decided they would test me – to see what kind of Christian I was. They began to talk about their lives and what they'd been up to. At one point, they started talking about going to court because they'd both been arrested. And they laughed, when they talked about which judge was easier than the others, and how they could manipulate the system. They laughed about how they'd gotten drunk the night before. Well, it went on and on, and I just sat there silently, and then, they turned to me and looked me right in the eyes, and one of them said, “I guess you think we're pretty awful, don't you?” Clearly, she thought that I thought I was better than them. Thank the dear Lord I knew enough to keep my mouth shut, and since it's Mother's Day, I will honor my mother and all mothers by saying that their words of “If you can't say anything nice, don't say anything at all” must have stuck, for I simply said, “No, let me go and get you some dessert.”

I don't know that I changed the world that day, but maybe, just maybe, those two women whose lives were tough, whose hopes and dreams the world in some ways had crushed, didn't feel like a Christian had done the same thing too.

I've said this more times than I can count – people are watching us. They want to see if who we say we believe in – Jesus the Christ – actually makes a difference in our lives. They watch and notice if we are judgmental rather than grace-filled. They watch and notice if we find ways to keep people out, instead of including them.

Oh, may it never be said of us that we are cruel Christians. May we never forget Jesus' words – “Let the one without sin cast the first stone” – remembering that we're all sinners saved by grace. Jesus has seen our sin, offered us grace, told us to sin no more, and granted us new life – over and over and over again.

As those who have received that precious, precious gift, may we go forth from this place to share it with others, because so many, many people are yearning for it. May it be so.

Amen.