

GO AND SIN NO MORE

John 8:1-11

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30 October 2016

There are thoughts and emotions we harbor inside ourselves that we are not proud of. Things cross our minds that we would not want to admit out loud. That's just part of being human.

Did you ever tattle on a brother or sister when you were young and then enjoy watching him or her get into trouble? Or do you remember a classmate, someone you just didn't like, someone who - perhaps - you felt competitive with - and when one time that classmate didn't know the answer to something, when that time the classmate was called on by the teacher and wasn't prepared - you felt secretly happy about it? I know you're not proud of those moments, but can you recall them? When an arrogant, braggy coworker was turned down for a promotion? Because we are imperfect people, we sometimes take pleasure in seeing someone else's downfall.

I can picture that day in Jerusalem. Jesus sits down to teach in the temple. People gather around to listen to him. It's a peaceful, quiet morning which is — all of a sudden — interrupted by some temple officials who are dragging a woman into the temple. She looks frightened, horrified, ashamed. They - the scribes and the Pharisees - look positively gleeful. They have found someone who deserves to be punished ... oh, there is such self-righteous happiness about that! And, even better, they've found another way to trap Jesus. What's he going to do about this woman? It's a double victory for these men who love the letter of the law, who are always on the lookout for people breaking the law and who are so suspicious of Jesus and his very different understanding of the law.

They are aware that Jesus knows the law, which is very clear on this matter. The woman should be stoned. If Jesus doesn't agree, they'll have him over a barrel. They know that Jesus has weaseled and wiggled his way out of these situations before, but there's no way he can do it this time.

Here's what Jesus does. He bends down and writes on the ground with his finger. He writes on the ground to indicate his unwillingness to spring the trap that has been set for him. The scribes and Pharisees continue to press him for an answer, so Jesus stands up and says, "Whoever here is without sin, go ahead and throw the first stone." Imagine dead silence. One by one, the men walk out. Jesus turns his head back down; he's writing on the ground again. He stands up and says to the woman, "It looks like no one is left to condemn you...then I don't either. Go and sin no more."

The scribes and the pharisees are sent away, to contemplate their own sinfulness. The woman is sent away, to contemplate her own forgiveness.

"Go and sin no more." It's our last "Go" message for this worship series. We've been talking about going for the last several weeks - go the extra mile, go in trust, go as one, go and do the same. We've been talking about all of the places God calls us to go: to our neighbors, to the hungry and the homeless, to those who think differently than we. But sometimes it's hard for us to go, hard for us to move off square one because we feel badly about ourselves.

Today's message is for anyone who feels weighted down by any kind of guilt. The guilt that comes from harboring judgmental thoughts. The guilt that comes from having broken God's laws, the shame that comes from living with mistakes. We all have, as the old worship prayer goes, "we all have fallen short." There are loving things that we neglect to do. And there are hateful things that have come out of our mouths. We fail the ones we love the most. We disappoint the people who count on us.

In this story, Jesus looks us in the eye, and — knowing ALL about us, says to each of us, “Go and sin no more.” It’s over. It’s forgotten. It’s forgiven. GO and embrace new life.

You see, the reason we are so judgmental is because we don’t want to look at the ugliness of our own souls, the messiness of our own mistakes. In the gospel of Matthew, Jesus says, “Do not judge, so that you may not be judged...why do you see the speck in your neighbor’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye?” It’s the language of hyperbole, it’s exaggeration, not meant to be taken literally. But it’s so true. The people whose faults bother me the most are the people whose faults I share.

The good news Jesus offers isn’t interested in tit-for-tat fairness. What Jesus is offering is transformation, new life, the ability to GO into our future relieved of the heavy burdens of guilt and shame we have been carrying around. He wants that for the rule-obsessed Pharisees and he wants that for the shame-ridden woman in the temple, and he wants it for you and me. Whether we’re carrying around a tendency to look for the faults in others, or whether we’re carrying around sadness from mistakes in our past - or both - we can’t go and be disciples, we can’t go and live abundantly until we’re free.

“Go and sin no more” isn’t about living perfectly in the future. Rather, it’s an invitation to transformation. And transformation always begins with a look inward. When we look at ourselves honestly, we will realize that we are broken and flawed people. We will then be less likely to judge other people harshly. None of us stands on unspoiled moral ground, after all. So why judge others? Why not look at them with compassion and empathy?

We live in a time when we have turned judging into a sport. We call names. We categorize people. We divide ourselves. Some people are more open about their prejudices, and some people keep them more hidden, but we all have them. We all have sinned, fallen short; we all stand in need of God’s grace and forgiveness. And we are all called to work towards a better future. Where we can make judgments without being judgmental.

Let me share with you a true story about transformation, about a move away from judgmentalism. It's the story of Derek Black, a young man who was a leader in the white nationalist movement. You could say that white nationalism was in Derek's genes. His father, Don Black, had created Stormfront, a white nationalist website, with more than 300,000 users. His mother, Chloe, had once been married to David Duke.

This was Derek's education. He was raised to believe that America was for white Europeans, and everyone else would have to leave. He learned to be suspicious of the United States government, of popular culture, even of tap water!

When he was college age, Derek enrolled in New College in Sarasota, Florida. Around campus, he mostly kept his opinions to himself. He studied in Germany for a semester.

Someone found out that Derek was a white nationalist. He "outed" Derek, and posted this revelation on the New College internet message board. The message went viral.

Here's where the story gets interesting, where I see God at work.

Derek had an acquaintance at New College named Matthew, the only Orthodox Jew at New College. For months, Matthew had been hosting Shabbat dinners, Sabbath dinners, where he invited a diverse group of people.

Matthew decided that his best chance to influence Derek's thinking was to reach out to him. "Maybe he'd never spent time with a Jewish person before," he said.

He sent Derek a text message. "What are you doing Friday night?" He invited Derek for Shabbat dinner.

Derek came. In fact, he became a regular attendee at Matthew's Shabbat soiree. The other members of the Sabbath group slowly began to warm up to him. Tentatively at first, but then more assertively, they began to ask Derek about his views.

They listened as he said that he was worried that massive immigration was going to result in what he called a white genocide. And then, Derek's studies conspired to convince him that he was wrong about certain key ideas. His mind was slowly opening.

One of Derek's Sabbath friends wrote to him about his involvement in the white nationalist movement. "Get out of this. Get out before it ruins some part of your future more than it already irreparably has." And so, eventually, Derek issued the following statement.

"After a great deal of thought, I have resolved that it is in the best interests of everyone involved to be honest about my slow but steady disaffiliation from white nationalism. I can't support a movement that tells me I can't be a friend to whomever I wish or that other people's races require me to think of them in a certain way or be suspicious at their advancements. The things I have said as well as my actions have been harmful to people of color, people of Jewish descent, activists striving for opportunity and fairness for all. I am sorry for the damage done."

In Derek's case, friendship with "the other" was transformative. Sharing a meal together, the most sacred meal of the week for Jews, was transformative.

What ultimately weaned Derek away from his hatred? Not just rational arguments. Not just his historical research into European history and the origins of racism. It was the power of relationship – the power of conversation, the power of listening and understanding, even the power of emerging friendship.

And now there is one less hater in the world. Change is possible. Hatred and prejudice can dissolve away.

This past Wednesday evening, our Turkish Muslim friends shared dessert with us - Noah's pudding, a symbol of peace and community. It's how we open our hearts and minds. By sharing meals and conversation with one another.

We can stay in our corners and hold stones, looking for the faults in each other. Or we can sit around tables together, aware that none of us is perfect, and find our commonalities. What we're called to do is GO and make a better world.

And so I ask you this morning. What is keeping you from the freedom which Christ intends for each of us? The freedom to GO, to walk without feeling weighted down by guilt or shame or by your judgmentalism. Are you harboring ill will towards someone or towards a group of people? This morning you are invited to write down a word on a piece of paper whatever word comes to mind that you would most like to be rid of in your life. What word symbolizes your feelings of prejudice or guilt? Write it on the piece of paper at the end of your pew or row of chairs and put it in the water this morning. By the time we are finished with worship, the word will have dissolved completely.

Let us pray. Holy God, we long to be free of those sins that weigh us down. Our feelings of shame, our rush to judge other people. Thank you for your forgiveness which makes us new. So that we can go into your world with love. Amen.

Sources:

Matthew, Thomas G. Long

"How the Sabbath Cured One Man's Hatred," Jeffrey Salkin