

Every night, I try to watch the evening news to find out what’s going on around the world and nearby, too. It’s predictable: there will be some kind of big story, about a war or somebody’s big mistake. The one that’s hit me recently is the father down South who apparently left his toddler son in a hot car all day; the boy died. Now the authorities are saying that this man may have left the youngster in the car intentionally... And all of us are appalled! How could a parent do such a thing, even unintentionally?? How could you forget your own toddler? All day?

As we hear of this horrible thing, there is a part of us that wants this father to be condemnable, to be totally despicable so that we can tell ourselves that HE is a bad person and so he did something bad; we are in no way like him! There is some comfort in being able to draw some sort of a line between people who do bad things and us. (Pause)

Perhaps when we hear the story of the woman caught in adultery as it is told in the Gospel of John, chapter 8, we assure ourselves that we have not done such a deed; this could never happen to me. But this story is about a lot more than just a woman who messed up in her life, whether we can identify with her or not.

Consider the context of this story in John’s gospel. Chapter 7 shows the authorities getting really riled up over this Jesus fellow. Lots of people were saying that Jesus was a real prophet; some were even declaring him to be the Jews’ long hoped-for Messiah. The Pharisees wanted him arrested but the “police” were unwilling to do so without just cause. So things were really heating up when it came to Jesus, and the religious authorities were more and more determined to get rid of him.

We’re told that Jesus went to the temple and that he began to teach. While he was sitting down and teaching, the religious authorities dragged a woman into the Temple. They made her stand before everybody, probably only partially clothed, and they tried to set a trap to take down Jesus. “Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of adultery. Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. What do *you* say?”

Let’s take a moment to consider what the Jewish law says. Leviticus 20:10 declares: “If a man commits adultery with the wife of his neighbor, both the adulterer and the adulteress shall be put to death.”

If Jesus agreed with the Old Testament law and called for the woman’s execution, the authorities could accuse him of sedition before the Romans, because since 30 AD the Romans had taken away the Jews’ right of capital punishment. But if he said that she should not be stoned, they could accuse him of false teaching and discredit him with the people, saying that he was not observing the Law as put forth through Moses.

Jesus was never one to be pushed into anything. Instead of trying to talk his way around the law, and instead of pointing out to the authorities that they themselves were breaking the law since the MAN involved in the adulterous act was apparently missing and not being punished (Jewish law stated that **both** parties were to be produced and prosecuted -Deut. 22:22), he was silent and stooped down and took the time to write something; nobody today knows what, because the Bible doesn't tell us.

Whatever he wrote apparently did not slow them down, because the Gospel tells us in verse 7 that they kept on questioning him even as he was writing. So Jesus stood up and said to those accusing the woman and trying to trap him: "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." Jesus then stooped back down and wrote some more. Some scholars have suggested that Jesus may have written Deut. 19:16-19, which warns that those who testify falsely against a person shall receive the same punishment the accuser was trying to have done to the one they were accusing... The older ones caught on more quickly and did the only smart thing they did in the entire incident - they left! One by one, the accusers left, until only Jesus and the woman remained there before the crowd.

Jesus stood up and asked her, "Woman, has no one condemned you?" And she replied, "No one, sir." And he freed her for life as he said, "Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more."

We may find it helpful to notice that Jesus first offered the woman freedom from any condemnation by him: "Neither do I condemn you." He did NOT say, "If you promise to leave this place and be good from now on, I will grant you my forgiveness." Instead, he freed her from condemnation, and *then* told her to choose life: Do not let your life be pulled down by this kind of thing any longer. Jesus himself had the freedom to forgive sin and offer grace. Romans 3:23 proclaims, "Since all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus..."

Justified, freed by undeserved forgiveness... The story is told that on March 22, 1824, an incident took place in Madison County, Indiana, which came to be known as the Fall Creek Massacre. Six white men murdered nine Native Americans and wounded another. Among the nine dead were three women and four children. The white men were apprehended and tried and some were executed. One of the men named John Bridge Jr. (only 18 years old) was sentenced to death by hanging for his part in the massacre. He was to be executed on June 3, 1825. His father, John Bridge Sr. and another man named Andrew Sawyer, who was John Bridge Jr.'s uncle, were also to be executed that day.

John Bridge, Jr., along with a large crowd, witnessed the hangings of his father and uncle. With no sign of a pardon, a sermon was preached as the crowd waited expectantly. Finally, John Bridge, Jr. was led to the gallows and the rope was lowered over his head. But as the men waited for a signal, a cheer arose from the back of the crowd.

A stranger rode forward and looked the condemned man in the face. "*Sir, do you know in whose presence you stand?*" Bridge shook his head. "*There are but two powers known to the*

law that can save you from hanging by the neck until you are dead, dead, dead; one is the great God of the Universe, the other is J. Brown Ray, Governor of the State of Indiana; the latter stands before you..." Handing over the written pardon, the governor announced, "*You are pardoned.*"

In an instant, what had looked like a hopeless situation became a door of hope. John Bridge Jr. went back home, settled down, opened a dry goods store and died peacefully, fifty-one years later! (Various sources)

We do not know what happened to the woman who was freed from death by the wise grace of Jesus, but we do know that each of us has been given a challenge through her story. The challenge: to always keep before us the way of Jesus Christ as we go through the pitfalls, choices, and accusations of this world. Though it finally got him killed, Jesus would not capitulate in the face of those who were trying to trap him and kill him. He challenged the challengers, and his challenge continues for us.

We live in a nation that often seems addicted to the concept of "freedom." But we tend to interpret freedom as being able to do whatever we want to do when and how we want to do it. The freedom God offers us is different. It is the freedom that comes to us when we *know* that nothing in life or in death can ever separate us from the love of God (Romans 8). It is the freedom we discover when we finally understand that in order to gain life we must be willing to let go of our tight hold on it a bit. This is possible, because GOD has an unfailing hold on us! God's everlasting arms will see us all the way through, which gives us the freedom to really live, in spite of cancer or joblessness or other kinds of hardship or brokenness.

In our lesson from Deuteronomy, the people were warned about how they should proceed as they took possession of the land so long promised them by God. Love God, obey God, and live justly, with compassion for those who are powerless. The people were given straightforward guidelines. The Bible shows that time and again God's people failed to abide by them. Though God let them be punished, God never abandoned them. The Bible is the story of God's persistent offer of forgiveness, grace, and hope, way back then and right now.

I close with a neat image a pastor shared about his church several years ago. These are the words of Norman Neaves, pastor of Church of the Servant in Oklahoma City, OK:

"A dirty, smashed-up trash can stands in the middle of the main entry of our church building. It is as pitiful looking as any galvanized steel trash can that one could find in the worst alley of America. Yet it is for us the most meaningful symbol of the Christian faith in our entire building.

The old, dirty, smashed-up trash can is used as a planter. Beautiful flowers and green foliage grow in the rich soil inside the can. It's a curious contrast between the beautiful and the ugly, the hopeful and the hopeless, the sacred and the profane. Some people smile when they first see it, others gawk quizzically, a few quietly reflect as though looking upon a piece of art.

Actually, it's a profound theological statement for most of us. It says to us Sunday after Sunday that no matter how downtrodden our lives might be, something beautiful can take place in them just the same - that no matter how dead-ended they might feel or how out-of-joint they might have become, there is still hope that God can free them and use them and there is still hope that they can grace the world."

Jesus came to free us from bondage to sin, that we may have and live out abundant life. By his grace, may we find the strength and freedom our Savior makes possible as we offer forgiveness, compassion, and hope to this world. Amen.