



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

May 15, 2016

"A Scandalous Grace" (Encounters with Jesus Series)-John 8:2-11

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Don't you hate it when people blatantly break very clear rules? This past week I was at Sam's Club waiting for the self-checkout counter to open up. Now you have to know there were huge signs *everywhere* clearly stating "Self-checkout 15 items or less". Only Stevie Wonder could miss these signs.

Well, low and behold there is a family checking things out with not one, but two shopping carts full of stuff! How many items is that? 50, 60? More? And then to top it off they are not quite sure how to do the checkout. They have so many items they keep on checking and rechecking the list on the machine to see if they already scanned that item. I could have grown a beard by the time they were done.

And then to pour salt in the wounds a Sam's Club roving worker, who is supposed to oversee such mishaps, says nothing. I thought to myself, "Why are you here if not to police such blatant violations of the rules?!"

Today's story has similar themes to my crazy experience at Sam's.

As we continue in our series of our "Encounters with Jesus" we come to an incident that occurs between Jesus, a hostile crowd,

and a woman caught red-handed breaking some major rules.

In some ways I think this is one of the more difficult sections of the New Testament. Difficult, not because it is hard to understand, but because it is so disruptive to how the world operates, to how many Christians normally operate, to how *I normally* operate in the world.

This story forces me to ask very hard questions of my life and attitude, and quite frankly I don't always like the answers I find as I look at my life through this story.

Let's look a little closer at this story to see and feel and be challenged and encouraged by what's going on here.

As we just read in verse 2, Jesus is at the temple in Jerusalem very early in the morning (at dawn). He is there teaching people like a lot of rabbis of His day would do. You can imagine people standing there captivated by Jesus, as crowds often were.

Suddenly, as He is teaching, a commotion erupts. As it says in verses 3 and 6, the teachers of Jewish Law and the Pharisees burst into this lecture by Jesus in order to try to foil Him and

upend His ministry.

The Teachers of the Law and the Pharisees are the guardians of God's Law. They know the rules of God up and down and they were not slow in pointing out violations of it.

When they see Jesus touch lepers, befriend and party with tax collectors and embrace prostitutes, and when they see Him dishing out grace and forgiveness like no one has ever done before, these guys get extremely angry.

To them, Jesus seems to be throwing around mercy *as if rules simply don't matter*. Jesus is kind of like that Sam's Club worker who ignored the flagrant violation of the "Checkout Rules."

So these leaders create a scenario to trap Jesus in order to silence Him. Basically, the trap comes down to this: If Jesus says, "stone her", He will be part of an act that was prohibited by Roman law. Jews weren't normally allowed to go around carrying out capital punishment.

Moreover, by giving the okay to stone her Jesus may also lose favor with those whom He so often loved on: the outsiders, the lowly, sinners, prostitutes, etc.

On the other hand, if He says, “let her go”, then He is easily charged right there in the House of God with violating the Law of God and He would lose a lot of respect.

Before we get to Jesus’ response to all of this let’s *feel* this story a little more. What was this woman’s morning like?

Imagine how she wakes up in bed with a man *not* her husband, and then—boom! Suddenly, there is a commotion in her home. Hostile and angry men come flying into her room screaming at her and verbally thrashing her.

Fears now flood her body as these men yank her out of her house and drag her down the street like an animal. I can’t help but wonder if she is crying out along the way yelling, “Let me go! Let me go!”

Along the way people are gawking looking shocked and angry. Men start picking up large rocks along the way waving them at her as they follow. She is then brought to the holy temple itself, dragged up its mighty stone staircase.

Then (verse 3) she is forced to stand all disheveled and ashamed in front of a gathering of people who are likely stunned themselves. The word here in verse 3 for “stand before” actually means “to stand in the middle of.” So picture her encircled with condemning eyes all glaring at her.

And then the men who dragged her there scornfully announce before the crowd her great and shameful sin.

Can you imagine if that was you? Right here in church, as I’m

just going along in my sermon, someone yells out and drags you up here and declares: “This woman was caught red-handed stealing from work! This man was caught right in the very act of looking at pornography!”

Can you imagine the shame, shock, and anger you would feel, just like this woman? But hey, who cares what this woman feels, right? After all, she blatantly violated one of the top laws of God. As my mother used to say, “You made your bed; now you sleep in it!” You get what you deserve. That’s all there is to this, a simple black and white situation.

But the Rabbi, the holy man whom all the people are talking about, oddly in all this commotion just squats down, writes in the dirt with his finger, and says nothing.

Notice verse 7 says that the teachers of the Law and the Pharisees *kept on* questioning Jesus. What did this sound like? “Well, what do you have to say? You know the Law, don’t you? C’mon, what do you have to say? We caught her red-handed. Why are you sitting there scribbling? You always seem to have answers, so what about now? What do you have to say?”

Maybe they’re sensing victory and their “badgering” comes out of their confidence that will finally nail Jesus.

Then finally, Jesus stands up looks around and says something that would change the standard for judging people for the next 2,000 years. Think about how significant these next words are in the history of the western world (Christian or not).

Jesus says, “If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her.” And with that, he calmly squats back down again and starts writing with His finger.

And just like that the crowd is silenced. It was a real drop the mic moment.

To be honest, the English translations of Jesus’ actual words miss the real force of the grammar in this passage. In the original Greek, it reads like this: “The sinless one among you, go first: *Throw* the stone.” As you can hear, it is much more blunt. This was not a polite request. This was an outright challenge.

By saying this, Jesus demands that they relate with *her* situation first, before any “rules” are enforced; relate to her in that, “Yeah, she’s a sinner—and I’m a sinner too.”

Then after a momentary pause the woman hears many stones fall to the ground and feet shuffle away. At that point, she sees Jesus stand up, look at her and speak in a kind voice (verse 10): “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” His use of questions is a way to be gentle with her here.

With her heart still pounding and her head still reeling from all that has happened, she responds, perhaps timidly, “No one sir.” Jesus then again says something that will blow her mind, “Then neither do I condemn you. Go now and leave your life of sin.”

One minute her body was taut with fear, hands trembling, eyes wincing, head down in shame, but now she encounters kind eyes, gracious words, and a chance to change.

Wow, what an amazing morning *she's having!*! This whole situation is really dizzying to say the least. This whole thing probably took place in only 20 minutes or so.

There is a lot we can draw from this story let me just point out a couple things.

First, as I alluded to before the pivotal moment in this scene is when Jesus lays out His great challenge: "The sinless one among you, go first: Throw the stone." It is amazing how our condemnation loses so much of its energy when our eyes first look to *our own* lives *before* we speak or act.

So what's the wisdom here? If your life is normal, you will need to confront people at various times in your life. People will honestly blow it with you for one reason or another and you will need to say something. Confronting or correcting someone does not mean you are not being gracious.

The thing is when you do go to confront or correct or discipline someone, pause and weigh your own life first. When you go to lay the boom on your child, when you go to nail your co-worker, when you go to confront that "jerk" of a spouse you have, go first to the video tape of your *own* life.

That doesn't mean you don't still discipline, correct, or even rebuke someone, but it means you do such things from a whole different starting place and attitude. I can't emphasize enough how the starting place is so crucial to the ending place and the outcome.

Science has shown us again and again that how you start a

conflict or confrontation has a direct effect and correlation on how it ends. If you start at a high and harsh emotional state you will likely end up in the same state when you are done...and you will not get the very outcome you seek.

So I can't overemphasize how the starting place is crucial to the ending place when you need to confront or give correction.

For example, (and I have permission from my wife to share this), my wife has had the weird habit of leaving her wet towel on our bed. And not just on any place on the bed—on *my* side of the bed!

But *before* I blow my cool for the 50th time, I say to myself, "Wait, Steve, you've done the same about leaving the cabinets open, which you know she has told you 100 times not to do. You've done the same with leaving the coffee pot on all day when no ones home. You've done the same...etc."

When I do that I suddenly notice, wow, I have a whole list of times where I blow it, just like her. And when I get an accurate sense of *me*, it then helps create empathy and compassion *for her*.

Yes, I still tell her about the towel and how frustrating it is, but it has a whole different outcome then if I came flying at her from the self-righteous starting place of how wrong she is...again! So again, the way you start rebuke, correction, or discipline has a direct affect on the outcome and how you end.

Another great thing, which I think is jarring here in our story, is that this woman has done absolutely nothing that makes her

"lovable" or "deserving" of such a response from Jesus. Jesus didn't even wait to hear a request for forgiveness before He started giving out all that grace. How crazy is that?!

I have to admit my personal theology would feel better if I saw a little repentance first. Don't you like it when your friend or spouse blows it and they show a little contrition first before you think about forgiving them? After all, you start giving grace out like this and who knows where it leads! People will get spoiled. Things will get chaotic.

But that's part of the disturbing thing about this passage. Grace is given even *before* forgiveness is asked for.

In that incredible gesture of grace we see the kind of raw love that God has for us, even in our worst moments. And don't forget, this is a "worst moment" for this woman's life. My point is this, Jesus is not waiting for you to feel really bad to start loving on you. He's not waiting for you to feel convicted before He starts giving grace to you.

Listen to writer, Paul Zahl as he comments on what divine grace is like: "Grace is love that seeks you out when you have nothing to give in return. Grace is love coming at you that has nothing to do with you. Grace is being loved when you are unlovable...Grace is one-way love."

What I see here in this story is this: Jesus simply does not need for you to be perfect or even a little good to be ridiculously generous about pouring out His grace on you, and to be ridiculously joyful about loving you.

I don't think Jesus is gritting His teeth too much here in order to love on this woman.

Let me expand on this important point. The religious leaders wanted others, and wanted Jesus, to look at this woman through the *rules* of God instead of through the *eyes* of God. It's just like how I wanted to look at that family at Sam's through the rules of 15 items or less. That's how I was framing them and who they are and what they do in the world—through the rules.

But Jesus, without negating the rules, demands that we see her *beyond* the rules.

Yes, people need laws and God's laws are good. But the thing about laws is that although they make great guardrails, they make lousy lenses.

My point is, to see this woman only through rules and laws is not enough to see her fully. We are always more than the rules we keep or don't keep. But we tend to weigh people by the rules they keep or don't keep, don't we? Judging people only by the rules limits our vision of who they fully are.

We like rules because they tend to think that they give us clarity; they take away the fuzziness in life. But such "clarity," if we are not careful, often leaves little room for grace.

When I work with addicts it is so easy to reach for that "easy button" of judgment and condemnation. Their sin is clear. The pain they are causing is clear. God's Word is clear about that sin. Bingo! Hit the condemnation button (isn't that so easy?)

And this is why grace always complicates things—simply because God loves that blatant rule-breaking addict so much. This little fact that God is *for* sinners, no matter their sin, disrupts everything I want to say or do with and toward the addict, the backstabber, the adulterer, etc.

That guy who has 50 items in the check out line...dead wrong! But the deeper truth is, God is *for* that guy. And I need to frame him from that point of view.

That guy who texts while driving and slows down traffic... dead wrong! But the deeper truth is, God is *for* that guy.

That guy who entered this country illegally, or that enemy who wants to destroy my way of life...dead wrong! But the deeper truth is, God is even *for* those guys. We do believe that don't we? What if we don't? What is the cost to our society and world if we have exceptions to this principle?

Are you starting to feel how scandalous and disruptive this story can be? How disruptive it is to our "easy buttons"?

Now this does not mean we don't create just laws to curb sinful behavior, or that we eliminate all consequences of sin, or that people don't get arrested, etc. Let me make this very clear, if someone is abusive to you pray for them *after* you call the cops. Calling the cops does not mean you are being ungracious.

But what all this does mean is we don't need to demonize, vilify, demean, or dehumanize sinful people, even the worst of

them, to bring about God's best in life and society.

If you look at people only through the rules it's easy to vilify and demean them. After all, if vilifying and condemning worked don't you think Jesus would have employed it here? Of all places, it would be easy to apply it here. So why doesn't He?

I'm making a big point about this because I think it is a big struggle for Christians to live well with both Grace and Truth or Grace and Rules. This is not easy. It is not easy to truly embrace *fully* the concept that God is *for* all sinners. And because we struggle with this it greatly affects our witness to the world, and not always for the better.

Listen to this clip, which gives some startling stats about how young adults in our culture view Christians. As you listen, see if we are known for being gracious. (video)

Again, the world hears what we are *against*, which is not always a bad thing, but do they also hear even louder that we are *for sinners* in the way Jesus was? Does the world hear through us that even though they are thoroughly sinful they have "*won the heart of God*"?

Listen to writer Preston Sprinkle as he makes a similar point. "God loves you because of who He is and because of what Christ has done. Whether you are depressed, suicidal, underweight, overweight, good-looking, ugly, dumb, smart, popular, socially rejected, happily married, divorced, physically fit, physically disabled, funny, dull... you have won the heart of God because you are human."

Do we believe this? Do we believe the gossip, the backbiter, the alcoholic, the porn addict, the radical jihadist, etc. has won the heart of God by the sheer fact that they are human?

Do *you* know today that *you* have “won the heart of God”? Or do you struggle with internalizing this amazing truth.

Do you hear, like so many of us, that tape playing over and over: “You need to be a little more perfect; a little more holy, prayerful, You need to be a little more hard-working, a little more accomplished....*and then* you will be more acceptable. You need to look a little prettier, thinner, cooler, younger, sexier, etc. and then you will be acceptable and lovable.”

Is that the voice you hear? I know I struggled with such voices for years.

Brothers and sisters, the people of Jesus are called to offer the alternative voice. A people who declare by our words and actions, to the worst of sinners, “*You have won the heart of God.*”

Look, here’s reality, people are not always good but they are always sacred to God and that little fact changes everything.

Now let me be honest, even as a pastor I have struggled with helping others get this message through *my* life.

Many years ago I was preaching at a weekend church family camp on the beaches along the Waianae coast. The first night, a Friday, went great. We all went to bed feeling soulfully boosted by prayer, worship and the Word.

Then somewhere in the evening a bunch of young people set up camp right next to us. Long into the night these guys partied like crazy—pounding music blasting from their stereos, drugs, drunkenness, yelling and screaming for hours!!!

By 4:00 am I, the speaker of the camp, wanted to call the cops and get rid of them. After all, how can I preach well if I’m dead tired? These guys are ruining the work of God!!

Well, apparently a number of the folks from the church saw things differently. They saw all this as an opportunity, not for the police, but for ministry.

To my surprise a couple of the church members actually invited these obnoxious people for breakfast and to lunch and even *to listen to the preacher*; to listen to the guy, who just a few hours before wanted to call the cops and rid the beach of these very people.

As it turned out, by Sunday morning about half of these young people gave their life to Christ and were baptized right there on the beach.

The people of that church wanted to approach such people with grace. I wanted to approach them with rules. My rules would have made camp “nicer” for us Christians, but their grace actually helped transformed their lives forever. Who do you think got it right?

As I have said, people are not always good, but they are always sacred; and that little fact changes everything. And when we approach them from that angle, then even dope-smoking,

drunken wild people can be saved through Jesus.

Getting this kind of grace flowing through our lives is *not* automatic or inevitable simply because we worship Jesus. To have the kind of grace Jesus displays here comes out of and is forged by a thousand little opportunities to practice grace in our day.

Let me give you a personal example of what I mean. Preparing for this sermon I was often reflecting on grace, *my* grace in particular. I could not believe how often in the course of my day I wanted to act in some other way than gracious, even about small meaningless things like check-out lines, or traffic, etc.

I was amazed at how often my default response to people’s errors was being indignant, annoyed, and even judgmental. And then I felt the Lord telling me to use my annoyance as a prompt pray for that person and myself.

It was a tough wrestling match at times, but in the end it totally changed my disposition and responses and greatly increased my prayer life. In the very least, it was very convicting.

So this week try an exercise. Tomorrow go through day and try to notice how many times a day you move toward anger, impatience, and a lack of grace on the check-out line, in traffic, at the office, at home, etc.

And then count how many times you are moved toward giving grace. Then weigh what you find in prayer with the Lord see what He may show you.

Then the rest of the week
train yourself to let the
“ungracious” feelings prompt you
to pray for that person and for
yourself. Your spouse leaves a wet
towel on you bed again. Pray. Your
kids leave the room a mess gain.
Pray. A guy cuts you off in traffic.
Pray.

Some of you may feel a bit
like the woman in our story in
need of some serious, scandalous
grace. Maybe you have blown it
in life big time. Maybe you find it
hard to internalize how you have
won the heart of God. Then I
invite you to open your heart to
receive Jesus’ grace for your life.

And if you already know this
grace then let me encourage you
to share and express this grace
with the people around you this
week.

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*Note: Sermon texts are also
available at fpchawaii.org. The audio
version can be downloaded from
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