***GO AND SIN NO MORE!***

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Texts: Ecclesiastes 7:20 and John 7:53-8:11

Some years ago, I participated in the Sunday portion of the Fortune-Williams Music Festival at the Museum of American Frontier Culture. Garrison Keillor was performing that afternoon, and I had the opportunity to visit with him backstage for a few minutes. I had gone there directly from worship here, so I still wore my suit and tie. He and I were the only persons formally dressed, though he was wearing red high top Converse basketball shoes with his suit. I had given the invocation, so I told him that the benediction was left to him. He paused a moment, rubbed his chin, and said, “Ah yes. What is one to say for a benediction at an event like this? Perhaps – go and sin no more?”

Those words do make a pretty good benediction – not only for that October event, but also for this first Sunday in Lent. *Go and sin no more* are Jesus’ words to the woman caught in adultery as recorded by John in the passage we read this morning. While they are spoken to the woman, they might just as well have been spoken to us or to the Pharisees and Scribes who brought her case to Jesus in the first place.

Some of you may be familiar with the work of The Innocence Project. Utilizing DNA evidence that may have been unavailable, overlooked, or withheld at trial, attorneys with the Innocence Project work to exonerate wrongly convicted people and have them released from prison. As of last summer, 193 people had been successfully exonerated, though only after serving an average of 14 years in prison! In some cases, prosecutors were more focused on securing convictions than in seeking justice. A classmate of mine in law school took a similar approach as a prosecutor; he withheld evidence in criminal cases in order to improve his conviction percentage and enhance his opportunity for advancement; when his actions came to light, it ended badly for him. Zealous prosecutors with ulterior motives are a threat to justice; in the case of those zealous prosecutors of the woman caught in adultery, they were also a threat to Jesus.

Frustrated by their inability to derail Jesus’ ministry, the Scribes and Pharisees brought this case to him, seeking not justice but a basis for bringing charges against him. Their allegation was that a woman had been caught in adultery and under the law of Moses should be stoned. Roman law did not allow such a sentence. The question posed to Jesus was in essence: Which law governs in this case – the law of Moses or the law of Rome? If he chose the law of Moses and the woman was stoned, the Romans might hold him accountable. If he chose the law of Rome, the Jewish authorities would accuse him of disregarding the law of Moses and compromising the faith. What do you say, Rabbi? Which law do you choose? Which law is authoritative for you – the law of Moses or the law of Caesar?

Interestingly, though the law of Moses required two witnesses in order to convict someone, the Pharisees brought no witnesses that day. Though the law decreed that both the man **and** the woman caught in adultery should be stoned, there was no male adulterer on trial that day – just the woman. Perhaps the Pharisees were to be the witnesses against her, perhaps the man with whom she committed adultery was a Roman outside Jewish law, perhaps the Pharisees really were looking for a way out of this predicament between the law of Moses and the law of Rome, but John doesn’t seem to think so. The question put to Jesus was, he says, intended to test him, to trap him, to bring about his downfall. What do you say, Rabbi? Shall we stone her?

In response Jesus did an odd thing; he bent down and began writing in the dust with his finger. What he wrote is anyone’s guess; the text is silent. Perhaps it really doesn’t matter, for what he wrote may have had very little to do with the Pharisees or the woman or the law. Perhaps it was Jesus’ way of buying a little time to reflect on his response. Or perhaps it was his way of putting off the Pharisees, of letting them know that he would speak with them when he was ready to speak with them – on his terms, not theirs. Whether he was doodling or writing something of great moment in the dust, we will never know. What we do know is that the Pharisees kept pestering him to answer, kept pressing him for his response. *What do you say, Rabbi?* Finally, Jesus straightened up and answered, “*Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.*” Then he returned to writing in the dust. Jesus let those words sink in without a daring glare or judgmental stare of his own. He didn’t call the Pharisees out by name or challenge them one by one or point a finger. He simply let the weight of his words descend upon the hearts of all those pious Pharisees who stood there with stones in hand. And one by one the stones fell to the ground and they all went away, for each one knew that the words of the writer in Ecclesiastes were true of them:

*Surely there is no one on earth so righteous*

*as to do good without ever sinning.*

We who live in glass houses should be hesitant to pick up stones to cast at anyone else. We who sit in judgment of others should pause and consider our own transgressions. We who would create a hierarchy of sins that make our sin somehow less sinful than the sins of those we accuse, should consider his words: *Let you who is* ***without*** *sin throw the first stone*. Go ahead. Convince Jesus that your sins aren’t nearly as bad as the sins of your neighbor, whoever your neighbor may be. Explain to God why your sins are less worthy of judgment than those of someone else, anyone else. Like the vineyard workers who protested that those who arrived later should be paid less, go ahead and argue for less grace to be extended to the sinner than to you. Go ahead and argue for your place with the self-righteous Pharisees or perhaps realize that you may be more like

the woman caught in adultery, or

the man who fails to remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy, or

the child who does not honor her parents, or

the neighbor who covets his neighbor’s things, or

the parent who takes the Lord’s name in vain, or

the one who breaks a commandment, any commandment, including

the great commandment: to love God with all that you are and

love your neighbor as yourself.

Jesus’ words were an indictment of the accusers for their self-righteous ways, but they were also words of grace for the woman accused. If you are among the accusers, then know that Jesus is speaking to you about your judgmental attitude. But if you stand among the accused, then fall on your knees in gratitude for the grace of God extended not only to the woman caught in adultery, but also to you.

For, when Jesus looked up from the ground where he was writing in the dust, only the woman remained. All the accusers had gone, convicted by their own sins. And he who alone could have judged her, he who could have thrown the first stone, chose instead to grant mercy and grace. *Has no one condemned you? Then, neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more.* Jesus did not ignore her sin or excuse it. He forgave it and charged her to be changed by that forgiveness, to be a new person, to live a new life unencumbered by the sins of the past. He urged her to be transformed by the gift of grace.

*Go and sin no more.* It is that charge to each of us who leave here as forgiven sinners. Go, not as you came, but as new people,

as forgiven people,

as people who want nothing more than to glorify God by living as Christ would have us live, by striving to sin no more, not out of fear of the consequence, but out of gratitude for the grace God has extended to us in Christ. We will not be wholly successful, for not sinning is for us a practical impossibility; we can no more avoid all sinning than the leopard can change his spots or the platypus become a swan. We are all sinners, but we can do better. We will sin, but let it not be for lack of trying to be obedient disciples each day, every day with every breath we take – seeking

not to cast stones but to heal wounds,

not to condemn but to forgive,

not to sin but to serve.

Lent is a time to face the reality of who we are and the possibility of who we might be. It is a time to drop the stones you have been anxious to toss at others and to accept the gracious forgiveness Christ offers to you – with humility and penitence, to accept that gift of grace. For

the God who is our judge also loves us without end,

the Christ who forgives us also died for us,

the Spirit who strengthens and supports us is with us always.

So, drop the stones and accept God’s grace, then go and sin no more – as best you can, go and sin no more! Amen