

Good News: Rooted in Justice, Mercy & Faithfulness

Fifth Sunday in Lent

John 8:2-11 Matthew 19:13-15
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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As we move toward Holy Week, the tension in the Gospel story begins to rise. The path to the cross is not sudden. It is not accidental. It is the result of a long and growing conflict between Jesus and those who held religious authority—those tasked with preserving the law, protecting tradition, and maintaining order. These were not villains in a simple story. They were people trying to be faithful. People who believed deeply in the sacred responsibility of the law. And yet, again and again, they found themselves at odds with Jesus.

In John 8, that tension comes to a head in a dramatic and painful way. Jesus is teaching in the Temple when scribes and Pharisees interrupt him. They bring a woman—dragged into the center of the crowd—exposed, vulnerable, unnamed. We are told she has been caught in adultery. And already, something feels off. **Where is the man?** The law they cite addresses both people involved. Yet only she stands accused. Only she is put on display. Only she is made to bear the full weight of public shame and legal consequence. **This is not justice. This is selective enforcement.** This is power at work. And we recognize it, because we still see it.

We still live in systems where some are policed more than others... where some are given the benefit of the doubt while others are presumed guilty... where some mistakes are quietly overlooked while others are dragged into the center of the crowd. So when they turn to Jesus and say, "The law of Moses commands us to stone such women. What do you say?"—this is not a neutral legal question. It is a test of what justice will be. Will it be punishment? Will it be fairness? Or will it be something deeper?

It becomes clear very quickly: **this moment is not really about her. She is a pawn in a larger game.** They turn to Jesus and say, "The law of Moses commands us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" It is a trap. A carefully constructed, lose-lose scenario. If Jesus dismisses the law, he can be accused of undermining the tradition that shaped his own faith. If he affirms the law, he becomes complicit in violence, contradicting the mercy he has been preaching and embodying. So Jesus bends down and writes on the ground. We are not told what he writes. Perhaps because the content matters less than the pause. The interruption. The space where the crowd has to sit with itself.

And when they press him, Jesus stands and says: "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone." Then he bends down again. And suddenly, justice becomes personal. No longer abstract. No longer theoretical. It is no longer

about *what should happen to her*. It is about *who we are in relation to one another*. One by one, they leave. Not defeated in argument, but confronted with themselves.

And in the silence that follows, we begin to see what this story is really about. **It is about mercy. And the inconvenient truth about mercy is this: Mercy is hardly ever merited.** If people had to earn mercy, it wouldn't be mercy at all. Jesus talks about mercy constantly. He tells his disciples to forgive not once, not twice, but seventy-seven times. He calls the merciful blessed. And even as he hangs on a cross, surrounded by violence and grief, he prays, "Father, forgive them." Which means we should not be surprised that here, in this moment, with this woman—caught, exposed, and very possibly guilty—Jesus embodies that same mercy. And let's be honest: it makes us uncomfortable. Because it would be easier if she clearly "deserved" mercy. But mercy does not wait for perfect clarity. Mercy does not require a full moral accounting. Mercy is given in the middle of the mess.

That's why mercy is so difficult. It's not soft. It's not sentimental. Mercy is brutal. Mercy is what we cry out for when we have messed up so deeply—in our relationships, our marriages, our parenting, our friendships—that we are staring at the collapse of everything we thought we were. Mercy is what we need when something in us has died—or is about to. And mercy is what we resist offering, because it feels unfair. It feels illogical. It doesn't balance the scales. It doesn't make us look strong or right or in control. It doesn't even always fix things. But **mercy is what makes us God's own.**

Notice what Jesus does here. He does not dismiss the law. He does not deny that harm matters. He does not say, "Nothing happened." Instead, he reframes the entire moment. **He moves the focus from punishment to transformation. He invites each person holding a stone to examine their own life.** He centers the humanity of the one who has been dehumanized. And then, when the crowd disappears, he speaks to her: "Neither do I condemn you." Not because nothing matters. But because condemnation is not the end of the story. He says, "Go your way." Which means there is still a life ahead of you. And then, "From now on, do not sin again." Not as a threat—but as an invitation. A possibility. A future not defined by this moment.

Here is where mercy and justice meet. Because we often think of justice as balance, as consequence, as getting what we deserve. But God's justice does not operate by our metrics. God's justice looks like a lost sheep being found. A lost coin restored. A prodigal child coming home. **God's justice is the joy of restoration.** God's goodness is not about retribution. God's goodness is generative. It creates life where there has been death. It makes a future where there was none.

Now, I wonder what happened to that woman after that day. Did she return home? Did she rebuild? Did she walk away and begin again somewhere else? Did she live cautiously, afraid of ever being caught again? Or did she live freely—changed not by fear, but by mercy? **What does it look like to live after mercy?** To become someone shaped not by shame, but by grace?

And maybe that is the question for us. **Because we are all in this story. Sometimes we are the crowd**—quick to judge, eager for clarity, ready to draw lines and throw stones. **Sometimes we are the woman**—exposed, ashamed, hoping against hope for another chance. And **sometimes we are called to stand with Jesus**—holding the tension between truth and mercy, refusing to let punishment have the final word.

As we approach Holy Week, we remember where this kind of mercy leads. It leads Jesus to the cross. To a place where the logic of the world says: punish, destroy, end it. And where Jesus says: forgive. Even here. Even now. Because mercy—

unmerited, inadvisable, and full of foolish hope—is how God refuses to give up on the world. **Mercy is the quiet insistence that there is always more than the worst thing we have done.** More than the thing that hurts us. More than the thing that haunts us. And this is the invitation we are given: To receive that mercy. To extend that mercy. To trust that in the most unlikely, unreasonable places... God is still at work.

"Neither do I condemn you." Go. Sin no more. Begin again. And live.

Amen.

Resources:

A Sanctified Art, Lent 2026

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