

Text: John 8.1-11
St Stephen's

March 18th, 2007
Sun AM

Grace When You Fail

Grace is God's "**One Way Love**" His "gift love" - Unearned, undeserved, without beginning, without change, without limit, without end. During these weekends of Lent we are looking at **grace in the life of Jesus**. In successive weeks we have looked at a **grace miracle** in his ministry, and last week we looked at the **grace-pattern** of Jesus' life. Today we are looking at a **grace encounter** with a woman in trouble, a woman whose life had failed.

The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery, and placing her in the midst they said to him, "Teacher, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery. Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such. What do you say about her?"

John 8:3-5 (RSV)

You remember her. "**Caught in adultery**" is the title of her story. But there is more to it, there is always more to it. All we know about her is that she was caught in bed with a man. One of them must have been married. That's what made it adultery. Maybe both of them were married. Maybe he is a Dad. And maybe she is a Mom. We don't know who she was or why she was in bed with that man.

She was looking for love. That's a safe bet. And looking in the wrong place on the wrong night. That's a safe bet, too. The door bursts open and she is dragged from the bed. No word about what happened to the man. He was just as guilty under the law as she was. But I think he got away, because this wasn't really about him or about her. They didn't really matter to the Pharisees. This was about Jesus, and the Pharisees needed some **bait to set a trap**. She would do, do very well. So the man, whoever he was, just disappears.

They dragged her out into the morning hours, brought her to the Temple where Jesus was teaching, and threw her down in front of him, and in front of everyone. Bait. The trap is set...

“Teacher, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery.”

That got everyone’s attention. It still does. I can see her clutching her robe about her, trying to hide. But there is **no hiding place**. Not here, not now. No doorway to run through. No escape. No covering. She is right out in the Temple court, **everyone can see her**. And the people press in. Everyone can **see her failure**. Everyone can **see her shame**. And in the very public place she is **all alone**. There is no help, no mercy. It is **all over**. And she can see the stones in the hands of the men around her. She wants to just die. She knows she is going to die.

Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such. What do you say about her?”

John tells us that...

This they said to test him, that they might have some charge to bring against him.

John 8:6 (RSV)

It was a well set trap: they put Jesus **between Moses and Caesar**. If he said, ‘Stone her’, they could charge him before Caesar, Caesar her removed the right to carry out the death penalty from Israel. (cf. John 18:31). If said, “Release her”, they would charge him with overturning the Law of Moses, which called for the death penalty in cases of adultery. And **it was adultery**. Everyone knew she was guilty. Verdict had been passed down. Sentence was now to be passed. The stones were in hand.

Jesus is quiet. Everyone is quiet. The woman is quiet. So **they keep pressing their question**. Jesus stoops down and writes in the sand. It gets quiet again... and then Jesus stands up and speaks:

“Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her.”

John 8:7 (RSV)

With those simple words, now famous all over the world, **the courtroom scene shifts**. The woman who was on trial fades out of view. People all of a sudden start looking at the Pharisees, the accusers, the ones with the

stones in their hands – they suddenly find that they are on trial! How did this happen! Everyone is looking at them! Jesus just bends down and starts writing in the dust again. We don't know **what he wrote**. Maybe sentences from the law. Maybe their names. Maybe their sins. We aren't told.

The reason the Pharisees were so offended by Jesus was that he saw things differently than they. He understood – and taught – that **the law**, God's good and righteous and holy law – **was not able to produce what it demanded**. He knew it actually **produces what it prohibits**. When the law meets fallen human nature, instead of transforming us, it infuriates us. Instead of producing righteousness it produces rebellion. In this sense the law fails. Every time. The failure of the law was not in what it intends to do, but in its capacity to do it. Just go tell your teenager to do something they don't want to do! Or try it with your spouse. Every time it fails!!!

As Paul Zahl has been saying to us on Wednesday nights, **the law kills**. The law had **no answer** to the woman caught in adultery. All it could offer was **stones**. It had no other answer to her failure. Stones were no answer at all, and a better answer, a gospel answer was at hand. First, he had to get them to drop their judgment. So he says...

"All right. Throw your stones.

The one who has never failed gets to throw first.

The one who is blameless 'inside and out' leads.

The one who has never strayed. Never fallen. Never wandered."

It got very quiet again.

But when they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the eldest, and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him.

John 8:8-9 (RSV)

Oldest first. Isn't that interesting? As time goes on, you get more honest about yourself, don't you? As the years go by, life has a way of

forcing you to look deeply into your own heart. God has designed life that way. And if you need a little help with honesty along the way, God will put you under the law. Just so you can understand, something that is very important to understand. **You and I are no different** from that woman. No different. We are just the same, captive under the power of sin. That is what Jesus saw and new, wherever he looked. He knew the Pharisees were **no different from the woman, no different from his disciples**. He knew the lost sheep of Israel included religious leaders, an adulterous woman, & devout disciples. All of them. No exceptions. **All of us**. No exceptions. He knew that every heart, every life was and is under the power of sin, that no amount of religious respectability can protect you. The problem goes deeper; it penetrates to the very core of our humanity...

"None is righteous, no, not one; All have turned aside, together they have gone wrong;

no one does good, not even one."

Romans 3:10-12 (RSV)

That is the power of sin, and it is **the story behind the story** of Jesus' ministry. That is what he sees ruling every life, haunting every heart. And **he knows the law can't touch it**. The **law has no answer** for this woman. Or for these Pharisees. So he puts it out there...

Throw your stones.

The one who has never failed gets to throw first.

No one threw a single stone. I think they must have just dropped them. I want you to hear **the sound of stones dropping**. They speak. It is the sound proud, judgmental people being honest. It is the sound of mercy. The sound of hope. It is the sound of grace... Listen... (drop several stones)

Jesus looked up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" She said, "No one, Lord."

And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you... go..."

John 8:10-11 (RSV)

She was guilty. And now she rises up, forgiven.
 She was humiliated. But she stands, graced.
 She was dead. But she lives again.
 Her life was over. But her life is new...

Paul would take these words and make them a banner of hope over every failed life, every honest heart...

There is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus.
 Romans 8:1 (NLT)

It does not matter who accuses if he pardons. If he pardons, there is freedom and life and forgiveness and love and grace and hope and new life!

Listen to the words again. Some of us here today need to hear his words again, let them wash over our hearts anew...

"Neither do I condemn you..."

Jesus finished his conversation with the woman with these words...

"go, and do not sin again."
 John 8: 11 (RSV)

What do you think happened to this woman? Do you think she rushed back into that affair? Do you think she failed again and again? Or do you think her life **took a new turn**, a whole new turn? Well, we aren't told, but my guess is that day the power of sin was broken in her life. Some reasons?

- For one, **we have her story** in the gospels. And people in the early church would have known her. They preserved her story. It was a story of a woman 'caught in adultery'. It became a story of a woman 'caught by grace'.
- Another reason? We know **the power of grace**. **Grace does what the law cannot do**. The law only had condemnation to offer. Grace offers something far stronger, what the heart needs, longs for. It offers one-way love. Free pardon. A fresh start. A new life. That forgiving word of Jesus would probe deeper and

deeper into her heart, until it silenced every sin, healed every wound, fulfilled every longing. Doesn't the grace of Jesus poke deeper and deeper into you like that?

- And one more reason I think she was changed. **She found the love she had been looking for**, longing for. She found him there that day, that **nightmare** of a day, that turned into the day of her **dreams**. She found the love she was made for in that dusty, stone ridden temple courtyard that day. She found Jesus. And he found her.

I want to close with **two thoughts** today. To speak those words to this woman, Jesus would pay a terrible, wonderful price. Those words, '*no condemnation*' would demand his life. He willingly paid that price. Behind me is **the Lord's Table**. We come to his Table again today, where we remember the price. His Table is a **'grace place'** where hearts can be healed and sins forgiven. Where you eat and drink mercy and hope and grace. If you need his forgiveness, come forward and pray to him, "Lord I surrender everything to you... forgive me, Lord, please." He will whisper to you as you come, "Neither do I condemn you, go in grace, freed from a life of sin..."

My **second thought** is this. I have placed a **basket of rocks** in the aisle this morning, the kind of rocks that might have been there that day. I want to ask you to **touch them** as you come forward as a way of saying, "No more rocks. I drop them today. I let them go. No more will I condemn. No more will I judge. No more will I look down on people. Because it doesn't work. It only kills. I will walk in grace. Give God's grace. Speak God's grace. Because by his grace I live."