

UNDER GOD'S WATERFALL OF GRACE
NOVEMBER 10 AND 11, 2018
JOHN 8: 2-12

It's the Feast of Tabernacles, and Jesus is in Jerusalem. He's been upsetting religious leaders, he's found himself the target of conspiracies to get him out of the way. This story is one of those.

He's teaching in the Temple, crowds surrounding him, when a group of Pharisees drag a woman in front of him. "We caught this woman committing adultery," they sneer, "and the Law of Moses says she should be stoned. What do you think?"

It's a horrible situation from the start. No investigation, no trial, just a woman dragged in front of a crowd, her fate thrust into the hands of a stranger as part of a religious debate. It's not even a subtle attempt to trip Jesus up. We can see this immediately – the Law which called for adulterers to be stoned applied to both parties. So, where's the man?

The answer is cynically obvious – the Pharisees are involved in a nasty piece of religious theatre. There's no man about to be stoned because the concern is less for upholding the law, more about trapping Jesus into saying something they could use against him. So, a random woman is considered more expendable than a man.

That's bad enough, but I've often thought, what if the man didn't actually exist? There is no evidence given that the woman committed the sin of adultery that she's accused of.

Sure, Jesus says "Go now and leave your life of sin", but that sin didn't necessarily have to be adultery. It's not impossible that the woman was innocent of the crime of which she was accused.

Jesus wasn't about to get caught in a Catch 22 situation; so, he takes his time giving an answer. And he stoops down and writes in the dust.

I've often wondered what he wrote. It'll probably be one of the questions I ask when I get to heaven.

What I do see in Jesus' action of dust writing, is that it gained everyone's attention, all eyes were on Jesus, awaiting his response. Perhaps taking the attention away from the woman, was a great act of mercy. This accused woman had been shamed; was likely cowering in the dirt, perhaps naked and afraid; but for one moment, her accusers had forgotten her and they had eyes only for Jesus.

And, he took advantage of the situation -- with all eyes upon him -- he stood up so every single person would hear His next words:

"All right, hurl the stones at her until she dies. But only he who never sinned may throw the first!"

That's it. And he stooped down again to write in the dust.

I don't know how much time went by, but John tells us that one by one, the Jewish leaders left until no one remained in front of the crowd but Jesus and the woman.

After hearing this story for years and preaching it several times throughout the years, I was struck by what that meant. The only one present, the only one left who could have thrown that first stone was Jesus. He was the only one who had no sin. And he chose not to condemn her for whatever her past sins may have been, but rather he challenged her to go and leave behind the darkness of those sins.

His response to sin does not condemn but rather shows us that the consequences of sin should be grounded in mercy and grace. Jesus challenges this woman to aim for a higher life, to make something more of it; to see her potential and to live up to it. He desires not condemnation, but restoration.

Jesus never even gets close to judging this woman.

So why is it so excruciatingly difficult for us to put down the stones we gather to hurl in judgment of others, when we have no right to even pick one up?

We tend to think we're not like these ancient people with their laws and codes regulating everything from the fibers in their clothes to the people they touched. But we have

our own codes these days – people we cast out from our communities or surround with Bible-wielding mobs, labels we assign to those who don't fit, conditions we place on God's grace, sins real or imagined we delight in taking seriously because we'd like to think they are much more severe than our own. We don't want this grace thing to get out of hand. Lord, have mercy.

We have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God and therefore we have no business judging anyone. Only the one without sin can throw the first stone. Only Jesus can condemn and he chooses instead to pour out a waterfall of grace into our lives; giving us opportunity after opportunity in this life to get it right. Time and time again, Jesus shows us how much God loves us and how much he wants to us to restore our relationship with him and others.

We all have our opinions of what God desires and our interpretation of what Scripture means. It really gets nasty, though, when we use our opinions and our interpretations to skew God's will to fit our will. That's what the religious leaders were doing in today's Scripture. That's what Jesus refused to do, even knowing that his choice would eventually come with a price.

Instead, Jesus writes in the dust; Jesus challenges those without sin to cast the first stone, knowing there were none; Jesus sends the woman away to sin no more without even saying what that means for her.

We never know what happened to the woman in today's Scripture, but the story wouldn't be over. It would play out to the end, just as all of our lives do.

But for today, this very day, Jesus offers us -- all of us -- stone throwers and stone receivers, alike -- a new path to follow that's flooded with the Living Light.

That's love. That's grace. That's Jesus.

Holy One, why is it that we can grow so weary of doing what is right, yet always energetically do that which we know is harmful to us and others? We throw stones of hurt and anger, and wonder why we harvest so much hatred. We spend too much time condemning the actions of those around us, and too few moments following Christ's example.

Healing God, open us to your mercy and grace. As you reach out to heal us with your forgiveness, may we embrace others with your love, your mercy, and your grace. Amen.