

One by one the stones fell to the ground. One by one the crowd in the Temple was reduced to two: the guilty woman and Jesus. "Woman, where are your accusers" he asked. "Does no one condemn you?" No one could. No one except the Christ, for he alone was without sin. For he was God -- He was the one sinned against! Yet instead of judgement, he offered forgiveness. A gift of grace: An unwarranted act done for the benefit of another. Changing what might seem unchangeable for the sake of one caught helpless in a hopeless situation. A deed performed, often at the expense of the doer. "I do not condemn you. Go, and sin no more". The woman's death sentence was lifted, her life returned. But now, not just life but A NEW life.

We don't know what happened to the lady as she left the Temple a free woman, but we all probably suspect life was different for her after that: that it was now lived in amazement for the overwhelming gift of forgiveness, lived in thanksgiving to Christ the giver, and lived in a totally new way as a result. We suspect it, because Christ gave us the same gift of grace.

My favourite story about graciousness is attributed to Queen Victoria, occurring at a banquet for honouring those who had shown great acts of courage in the past year. One of the guests was a common coal miner, unfamiliar with the protocol and etiquette of such high occasions. He struggled through the meal, and at the end a finger bowl came with a sprig of mint floating in it. Assuming it was just another course -- some special soup -- he picked up the bowl with both hands and downed it in one gulp. Well the victorian sensibilities of some of the more refined guests were disturbed by this act, and they gasped quietly at this faux pas. But Queen Victoria, without batting an eye, picked up her bowl in the same manner and drank it down.

God does this with us every day: God takes our simple and faulty efforts that we make in God's service -- recognizes them as such yet still accepts us and works through us -- that we might feel one with God -- ensuring that the work of the kingdom is still moved forward, **EVEN DESPITE US.**

Grace begets grace. Let us honour the giver of the grace we have received by living more graciously ourselves.

"No Need for Stones"

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Text: John 8.1-11

Rev. Peter Coutts

The student sat in the coffee shop -- 9:45 in the morning -- doing his last minute cramming for a final exam at university -- doing his best to squeeze the last few facts and figures into his head. Overwhelmed by information overload, he stood up, stretched, and made his way across the university center to check the listings for the times and places for the many exams -- to find out where he would be writing his 11:30 exam. He checked through the columns, found the course number, and was stunned to discover that his exam actually started at 9:00. Grabbing his books, he charged off across the campus, ran into the right building, flew up two flights of stairs and along the hallway to the classroom. He blew into the room an hour late for the exam -- one hour remained to him for completing the paper.

He worked frantically against the clock, but the deadline came before he was finished. The other students stood, filed slowly to the front and handed in their exams -- and one by one the crowd in the classroom was reduced to two: the student and his professor. Hoping against all hope, just to squeeze in one more answer before the exam paper was demanded, he kept his head bowed and scribbled as fast as he could. But the expected demand never came. The electric clock clicked audibly behind him, marking the passing minute.... and again.... and again.... still he wrote... still the professor sat and waited. After some twenty minutes, the young lad finally stood, and sheepishly handed in his exam to the professor -- awaiting its rejection. But the prof accepted the paper, smiled, and said, simply, "thank you".

I got a "C" on that exam. It was a mark I really didn't deserve. The regulations of the school were clear: you had a two hour time frame to write your exam, and that was all. I was no one special, deserving some preferential treatment, and I'm sure the professor had better things to do than sit around waiting for a tardy student like me.

An act of grace. Grace is a hard word to define -- a concept that can be somewhat hard to understand. YET... so easily recognized. I have been the beneficiary of many acts of grace in my life, as have you. Like.... being caught by the police, fair and square, speeding along the highway in my car, yet leaving the encounter with a warning rather than a ticket. Like being seated by an usher at the theatre, even

though I had forgotten to bring our tickets. Grace. An unwarranted act done for the benefit of another. Changing what might seem unchangeable for the sake of one caught helpless in a hopeless situation. A deed performed, often at the expense of the doer. The root word of the greek word for grace (Xaris) tells us that an act of grace produces "goodwill".

As I consider the ways of our world, and my own ways, my hunch is that our race is not by nature a very gracious one, despite the fact that we have benefitted from acts of grace. We tend to get angry when our wishes and will are swept aside by others. Then when our insights prove true, we derive satisfaction in thinking (and at times saying) "I told you so". When we face insult and injury we take simple solace in rules and restitution. My professor might have, but he didn't. Instead he granted me the time I needed to fulfill the task before me: time I didn't deserve, but time so greatly appreciated.

Now there was not much grace in the hearts of the scribes and Pharisees who brought the woman before Jesus in the Temple. Judgement would already have been passed on her by them. To bring charges against her and condemn her, the law required that two witnesses (other than the husband) actually catch the woman in the act of adultery. It seems clear from the story that her guilt was beyond question. So too was the punishment, for the Law also was all too clear. In bringing the woman before Jesus, her fate was probably sealed: death by stoning. A horrific way to die -- BUT that's what the law required. And if we recall the public pageants made out of executions in our history (the guillotine of the french revolution, the witch burnings of New England, terrorists posting beheadings on YouTube) -- it's easy to imagine a crowd already... waiting expectantly with stones in hand. But now, in facing Jesus, she was only a pawn in the Pharisees plan, her fate seemingly sealed. A helpless woman in hopeless situation.

What the trap actually was is not immediately clear in the text, but it probably involved the conflict between Jewish Law and Roman Law. Under the Torah, the woman was rightly condemned to death -- the Jewish law said "stone her". But the Romans had taken away the Jew's recourse to capital punishment. And so the dilemma: if Jesus said "kill her" they could hold him up as a revolutionary against the Romans. But if he said, "spare her" in honour of the Roman law, they could label him as a heretic. But Jesus, as he did so often in his relationship with the Pharisees, He completely side-stepped these issues. He said simply, "the person who is without sin among you, YOU can throw the first stone". It is not easy to hold

the stone, and be prepared to throw it, when you know you have fallen short of God's glory yourself in your own way.

Another professor of mine one day warned us against buying our essays (yes, some students have more money than brains). He told us the tale of the day he was marking a thick stack of essays. As he began to read one, the flowing words began to ring familiar, and he soon came to realize HE HAD READ THAT PAPER BEFORE. Some student had scooped this essay and stuck their name on it, with the hope of getting a reasonable mark without really doing anything. He was very angry by the middle of the paper, and was beginning to think about how he would punish the student. But then, a light went on, and he realized: "this essay is familiar because I wrote it!!" Years before as an undergraduate himself, he was a struggling student, and had sold some papers to an essay service for a bit of extra pocket money. Somehow one of them, like a bad penny, had made its way back to his own desk. So what did he do? He returned the paper with a personal note on it: a note that made it clear to the student that the Prof new the student didn't write the paper, a confession that the Prof had actually written it, a warning against doing this sort of thing again.... and a mark which reflected fairly the contents of the paper. It was not the prof's fault that the student bought the paper, but in his own small way he had contributed to it. And how could he pass judgement on that person when he in fact was just a guilty.

"Those among you who are without sin, YOU may throw the first stone". The passage says, first it was the older ones (presumably the wiser ones, more experienced and more honest to themselves) -- they were the first to leave.