

February 3, 2019

We Believe

We Believe in the Forgiveness of Sins

John 8:2-11

Opening words: Let us begin by remembering the words of the Apostles' Creed:

I believe in God, the Father Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth;
And in Jesus Christ his only Son, our Lord;
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, dead, and buried;*
the third day he rose from the dead;
he ascended into heaven,
and sitteth at the right hand of God the Father Almighty;
from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.
I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting. Amen.

The Apostles' Creed was not written by the Apostles; it is called the Apostles' Creed because it summarizes the teachings of the Apostles. The Apostles' Creed is important because it does three things. First, the Apostles' Creed tells the world what we believe. That is important because our world is getting smaller. Non-Christians want to know what we believe. Second, the Apostles' Creed reminds us, as disciples of Jesus Christ, of our core beliefs. Being a good person is not good enough. Christian theology is clear and structured. Third, the Apostles' Creed reminds us we stand with the church throughout the ages. Ours is not the first generation to recite these words. The Apostles' Creed is a historic document, which came to us from the first and second centuries. We stand with the saints of the past. Each phrase of the Apostles' Creed is grounded in scripture.

Today, on this Communion Sunday, I continue my sermon series on the Apostles' Creed, *We Believe*. In the first two messages, we have looked at the Christian understanding of God and Jesus. In the weeks to come, we will look at the Holy Spirit and the church. Today, we look at the Christian understanding of the forgiveness of sins. Our scripture reading for today is John 8:2-11. Let me call this message *We Believe in the Forgiveness of Sins*.

John 8:2-11

² At dawn he appeared again in the temple courts, where all the people gathered around him, and he sat down to teach them. ³ The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group ⁴ and said to Jesus, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery.

⁵ In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?"

⁶ They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him. But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. ⁷ When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let any one of you who is

without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." ⁸ Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground. ⁹ At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. ¹⁰ Jesus straightened up and asked her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?"

¹¹ "No one, sir," she said.

"Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin."

Bryant H. McGill (born 1969) is an American author. He once said, "*There is no love without forgiveness, and there is no forgiveness without love.*" I believe he is correct. If you find some wisdom in that quote, say, **"Amen!"**

We find ourselves today in the eighth chapter of the Gospel of John. According to the text, the Master is in Jerusalem. The sun has just risen, and Jesus was in the outer courts of the Temple, teaching those who had assembled. We do not know Jesus's topic, but we do know Jesus was interrupted by his enemies, the teachers of the law. In a show of force, they suddenly appear with a woman, who has sinned. No one debates her guilt. Everyone agrees she has done wrong. She was guilty of adultery. (Isn't it interesting that only the woman appeared on that day. The last time I checked, it takes two to commit adultery.) You know the truth. We live in sexually liberal times; they lived in sexually conservative times. The law demanded the adulterer be stoned, so the law demanded this woman be stoned.

Verse five says, they asked Jesus his opinion, "What do you say?" Verse six says, they asked this question for one reason. They wanted to trap Jesus with his own words. The teachers of the law were not interested in justice. They were not interested in the woman. They were not really interested in protecting the law. They were only interested in one thing, eliminating Jesus. Their question was well crafted. It is a question with no right answer. It is like asking the question, "Do you still beat your wife?" If you answer, "No," then it means you used to beat your wife. If you answer, "Yes," then it means you are still beating your wife. If Jesus says, "No," then it looks like he is ignoring the laws of Moses. If Jesus says, "Yes," then he is breaking Roman law, which refused to permit the Jews to take a life. It appears to be the perfect trap, but Jesus seizes the opportunity to teach the crowd about the Kingdom of God. How is sin handled in the Kingdom of God? This story models for us how God deals with sin. This story reminds us how we deal with sin. God's ways and our ways are not the same. If you can agree with that statement, say, **"Amen!"** Can I ask you a question?

Why is it so easy for us to identify someone else's sins? That is what is happening in the scripture lesson for today. Look at the text with me. No one in the story is questioning this woman's guilt. She was, so to speak, caught with her pants down. We do not know the details of the story. We do not know if this was her first offense. We do not know if she was a repeat offender. The details really don't matter. The only thing that really matters is her guilt. Do you know of anyone who is guilty? Do you know of anyone who will never be forgiven? When that person's name is spoken, everyone goes for their favorite rock. How easy it is to identify other people's sins.

You can ask any member of the clergy in this area and they know "Sarah". There is no other way to say it. She is a mess. She could lose a few pounds. She could wash her hair and her body. She smells like a giant cigarette, which explains why her breathing is labored. She always has a different story, yet every story ends the same way: she needs financial help. She has come to, or called, this church countless times. Yes, I have helped her two times. However, I will never help her again. I will tell you why.

One day, Sarah came in and told me she was hungry, because she hadn't eaten in a couple of days. I was really touched by her story. No one should be hungry. I gave her some time and I gave her a gift certificate to a local grocery store. I prayed with her and walked her to the door. I treated her with dignity and respect. Because, everyone deserves to be treated with dignity and respect. As we stood at the door, she thanked me one more time with tears in her eyes. She was heading to the grocery store, so she could eat. From the door, I watched her walk toward her ancient SUV. I felt good that I had helped someone. Then, I looked inside of her vehicle. I was surprised to see other people. Maybe I should have given her a larger certificate? Maybe they were hungry too? However, do you know what surprised me the most? The people inside the van threw a bag out of the back window. A sea of paper and plastic spread throughout the parking lot. I went out to pick up the trash and discovered they had been to Taco Bell. Someone had eaten a burrito supreme. Someone else must have eaten a volcano taco. The reality hit me, and I felt like a fool. She got me. There is no other way to say it. Sarah had lied to me. They had been eating! That explains why she could lose a few pounds. On that day, I labeled her a sinner! I will never help her again, because I feel like I was part of her problem. Sarah reminds me that it is easy to identify the sins of others. If you will admit that it is easy to see the sins in others, say, "**Amen!**" However, this is equally true: We are blind to our own sins.

Why is it so hard to identify our own sins? Look at the text with me again. Everyone is standing around the adulterous woman. They are holding their favorite stone and are hungry for justice. Everyone is ready to execute the sentence, when Jesus ruins the party. Verse 7 says, "*Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.*" Suddenly everyone drops their rock and walks away. Why? Because, no one is sinless. Everyone is guilty. Everyone had to admit they were a sinner. There is not a single sinless person in this crowd. That means, you are a sinner!

John Lennon (1940-1980) was shot by Mark David Chapman (born 1955) on December 8, 1980. He was entering his apartment building, The Dakota, in New York City. When the news was announced, a crowd of people assembled on that spot to remember him. Lennon was dead and Chapman was sent to Attica. He is still in prison today. Through the years, journalists have interviewed him. One of them asked Chapman, what he regrets most about the whole event. He responded, "I am saddened people seem to misunderstand me. I am not a bad person. I only killed one person." How difficult it is to identify our own sins. How easy it is to identify the sins of others.

One of the great traditions within the life of the church is baptism. As a pastor, it is rewarding to baptize our youngest. I like to carry the baby around and introduce them to their new church family. Baptisms are important for three reasons. First, baptisms are like a coming-out party. Second, baptisms are a commitment. The parents are promising to raise that child within the faith. The church is promising to create a Christian environment. Third, we are dealing with the child's original sin. It is the sin we inherited from Adam and Eve (Genesis 3). There is flaw within our soul which prevents us from being perfect. Baptisms remind us that we are sinners. Each one of us wrestles with our own original sin. Romans 3:23 says "*All have sinned and have fallen short of the glory of God.*" Never forget it. You are a sinner! And all of God's sinful people said, "**Amen!**" Forgiveness is a complex topic.

We are different from God in many ways. One of the ways we are different from God is forgiveness. God forgives easily. We find it hard to forgive. It goes against our very nature. That is why we wrestle with Colossians 3:13, "*Forgive as you are forgiven.*" We find it easy to accept forgiveness. We find it nearly impossible to forgive someone who has hurt us or a loved one. However, you must learn how to forgive, because you are a disciple of Jesus Christ. You are supposed to be a little more like Jesus every day. Jesus forgave the woman. We must forgive others. You are supposed to be practicing today what you will be doing in heaven for eternity. Let me ask you a question with an obvious answer.

How does God treat sinners? This is the answer. God treats sinners, like you and me, with mercy and compassion. You must hear this. God does not condone or accept our sinning. God expects us to do better. That is what happened in the Bible story. When the scene ends, only two people remain, Jesus and the woman. The Master could have stoned her. He was sinless and she was a sinner. However, he looked at the woman and had compassion. When he looked at the woman, Jesus didn't just see a rule breaker. When he looked at her, he saw an unhappy broken life, who was wasting her potential. Jesus cared more about her than he did about the law. God cares more about us, than the law. Which is more important to you, people or the law?

This story came out years after President Calvin Coolidge's (1872-1933) death. In the early days of his presidency, Coolidge awoke one morning in his hotel room to find a cat burglar. Coolidge engaged the thief in quiet conversation and discovered he was a

college student, who had no money. He couldn't pay his hotel bill or buy a ticket back to campus. Coolidge asked, "How much do you need?" The young man replied, "\$32." Coolidge counted \$32 out of his wallet and handed it to the young man. He said, "Consider it a loan." Then he advised the young man to leave the way he came, so he wouldn't be caught by the Secret Service. (Yes, the loan was paid back.)

I love that story, because Calvin Coolidge cared more about the young man than about the law. What is more important to you, the law or the person? Do you remember the quote from Bryant H. McGill? He once said, "*There is no love without forgiveness, and there is no forgiveness without love.*" And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**" Go and sin no more!