

October 23, 2016

TEXT: John 8:1b-11

TITLE: Climate Change

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Nothing takes place in a vacuum. No instance in human history from the Big Bang to the discovery of fire to the today's American presidential campaign has occurred in isolation. Many forces come together to shape each moment of our private and collective lives. We are influenced by others—by their attitudes and choices—just as we are influenced by weather patterns and flu bugs and fluctuations in the economy.

We can do our best with Ziploc baggies and air-tight storage lockers, and UV-blocking Plexiglas to control our environments and preserve what we value in the status quo, but there are no tools that can provide insulation from the social, emotional, political and spiritual environment in which we live. There is no protective container that removes the impact of outside forces on our well-being, safety, decision-making, or sense of peace. As much as we might wish we could make it so, life does not play out in a bubble.

The truth is that humanity is inherently interactive. We are interdependent. We are shaped by the climate in which we live—and we shape others too.

As we engage the text of our scripture for this morning, we see that the same was true back in Jesus' day. We encounter a story often titled "The Woman Caught in the Act of Adultery"—a title or sub-heading in our bible that reminds us of the sinful world in which we live. And of course, the focus of the scene pivots immediately to the sensational: the naked woman ripped from some private bedroom and paraded before the town—exposed, vulnerable, shamed.

Often when we read this text we focus on the woman's "sin." That's what everyone is preoccupied with, isn't it? That's what the Pharisees tell us is important. They call everyone's attention to an encounter that this unnamed woman was having with a man who was not her husband. They demand judgment, from Jesus and from us.

Now, as much as the Pharisees have caught our attention, we can quickly see that we're only getting a piece of the story, aren't we? There is an elephant in the room that compels us to ask: Where is the MAN? Why wasn't her partner dragged before the town and shamed in his nakedness? Why does he get to escape into the sidelines, letting this woman bear the blame of an illegal act?

We quickly forget that when it came to sexual politics the era in which Jesus lived was filled with double standards. We quickly forget that in this day and time a woman was seen as property of a man—a father and then a husband, and then, if widowed, a son. A man could marry many women and even take many concubines, while a woman had so little control, in fact, that one wonders if she was even caught in an act that was consensual at all.

But when this woman was brought before Jesus, he seemingly ignores what the Pharisee has said. He doesn't condemn the woman or even acknowledge the Pharisee's questions. He doesn't even LOOK at the woman in question. Rather, he bends over and writes in the sand. And when the Pharisees persist with their questions, he shifts the focus away from the woman and onto the crowd, saying the famous line: "Let any of you who are without sin cast the first stone." He shifts focus away from the perceived sin of the naked woman standing in the middle of the town, and shifts focus to the sin of the town itself.

See, Jesus knew what people often forget: nothing – not even sin—takes place in a vacuum. Crimes or sins or acts of violence are not merely private encounters between individual players. Rather, these events play out in a society filled with history, unwritten rules, norms and sins all its own.

He knew that, in this woman's case, the world around her was just as much to blame for her situation as she was—frankly, maybe even more so. He knew that the culture carved out a subordinate role for this woman that put her in unsafe situations. He knew that she had been victimized by a society that did not see her humanity, let alone her worth. He knew that even if she had chosen this life, it was because she had chosen the lesser of two evils. He knew that she alone was not to blame.

So what about us? In many cases, the same is true for us, today. Nothing, not even sin, takes place in a vacuum. The events of our day play out in a society filled with history, unwritten rules, norms and sins all its own.

Now, yes, individuals make choices. They pull triggers. They take what's not theirs. They deflate footballs and tell lies and ignore the word "no." And individuals, in most cases, ARE culpable for their own actions.

But we have to admit that, much like Jesus' day, violence and sin and injustice cannot thrive unless it plays out in a climate that fosters its survival. And as much as we hate to say it's true, even today—after so much has been done to try to honor the full humanity of all of God's people –society is still broken.

- Sexual assault against women continues, in part, because we live in a culture that has said for millennia that women's bodies are for men's pleasure; that women are to blame if a man cannot control his urges; that if tight skirts and alcohol are involved, a man can't be expected to know that no really means no.
- African American men are incarcerated at a disproportionate rate to their white counterparts due, in part to policing measures such as stop and frisk that reinforce a mentality that presumes the criminal intent of African American men, built on over two hundred years of legislation from slavery through Jim Crow that enculturated a mentality that black men are not fully human.
- And inaccurate and inflammatory rhetoric of fear continues to perpetuate lies all around us—lies that paint Muslims as radicalized terrorists or transgendered persons who want to use the bathroom of the gender with which they identify as predators.
- The list goes on!

We live in a culture—and, frankly, in a world—that permits violence to thrive. This permission comes both through hostile action and through complacent inaction. It thrives when we want to pay so little for a product that we don't even think about the conditions of the person who labored to make it. It thrives when we pretend we didn't hear a racist slur because of the discomfort it would cost us in our workplace, or write off language endorsing sexual assault against women as "locker room talk." It thrives when we insist on knowingly using the wrong pronoun for a transgendered person, or when we stare at a woman wearing a hijab.

Friends, we desperately need a climate change—that our community and our world might no longer be a breeding ground for violence: for the victimization of the weak, for the hoarding of resources by the powerful, for the acceptance of words that bully and demean, for actions that diminish the full humanity of others.

We need to do the uncomfortable work of naming and then addressing violence on a systemic level—acknowledging that systemic racism, sexism, heterosexism, xenophobia—are, in fact, alive and well. We need to notice the sins in the system. We need to call out how we play into it—through our fears, our ignorance, our action and our inaction. We need to stop settling for less, blithely hoping that we won't be the ones who end up with targets on our backs.

Now, while it may seem disheartening to hear that our personal choices carry such social baggage with them, the good news is, also, that none of us live in a vacuum. We are influenced by our surroundings, AND we influence the world. People impact people. And the good news behind that truth is that we CAN make a difference. Like the

butterfly who flaps its wings in Africa can impact weather patterns half a world away, our personal choices and private decisions can shape the world in public and life-giving ways.

Last week the Washington Post ran an article about Derek Black, son of white nationalist parents and godson of David Duke. We learn both of how Derek's beliefs were shaped by his family—how as a child he even hosted a white nationalist radio show. But we also learn how his whole outlook was changed by a college classmate named Matthew. Mathew was an Orthodox Jew who thought that the best response to learning of Derek's racist background was to include him in a weekly Seder he hosted. A risky extension of friendship gradually dismantled Derek's worldview, and he has denounced the movement of which he was an ardent player.¹

People impact people. Change is possible.

So what can we do? How can we effect change? Well, we can always learn something by taking a look at what Jesus did.

First, when Jesus was faced with a specific situation, he acknowledged that it was part of a larger system. He turned attention onto the crowd, and in doing so called out that the climate in which they lived was full of double-standards, victim-blaming, and indoctrinated sin. We too can call out the sins of the system. We can name hard truths—like the fact that white privilege persists and that not all people are treated equally. We can put things into perspective, looking at the weight of cultural forces on specific situations, and work together toward a level playing field.

Second, Jesus stood with the victimized. Although he had no prior connection to her and did not belong to her demographic, he stood alongside her. This painted an important picture—for the woman and for the crowd – that this woman was not alone. There was at least one ally standing with her. There was at least one other person—a person who looked A LOT like the crowd!—standing in the center, bearing witness to what was going on. We can be allies with those who are oppressed. We can stand in solidarity with our brothers and sisters who are marginalized or whose rights are being infringed—whether we look like them or whether we benefit or not.

Finally, Jesus showed mercy. He loved the one who was shamed. He affirmed her worth against the messaging of the time that denigrated her. He did not define her by her “sin” as others had. He did not perpetuate lies or give merit to labels. He saw the

¹ https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/the-white-flight-of-derek-black/2016/10/15/ed5f906a-8f3b-11e6-a6a3-d50061aa9fae_story.html

woman as a person who was hurting. He not only saved her life from the angry mob—he restored her humanity. We too can honor the full humanity of all of God’s people. We can listen to the stories of those who are marginalized with compassion and tender care. We can make the effort to see beyond labels. We can love those the world has ignored.

Friends, we are a part of something much bigger than ourselves. Yes, we are citizens of a fallen world who wears its sins on its sleeves. And we are participants in broken systems that overwhelm and sometimes even oppress us.

But we are a part of something even bigger than that:

We are a part God’s narrative of grace—recipients of redemptive wholeness won for us all by Christ Jesus.

We are children of a loving God who has made us in the Divine image and, in spite of our limits, has claimed us and called us to share that love with others.

We are a part of something bigger. We have been eternally impacted by a God whose love will not let us go. Let this good news give us the courage to love in the face of hate.

Let us, with God’s help, change the world.

And let all of God’s people say: AMEN.