

What Would It Take to Forgive Yourself?
The Third Sunday in Lent
John 8:1-11 The Message
March 24, 2019
Rev Dr. Marcia B. Bailey, preaching

I was deep into my final yoga pose, legs up the wall (which, if you have never tried it, is wonderful!), when I realized I was standing there.... *there with the woman* surrounded by men hurling abuses while Jesus stood by, watching. Somehow in the focus and subsequent relaxation phase that typically ends a yoga practice, my mind, heart, imagination (I don't know which, all?) transported me to this scene in the John's Gospel I had been thinking about earlier in the day.

I found myself *alongside her*, facing the verbal blows flung by this "knowing" group as they taunted, jeered, accused her without restraint. Tension emanated from her body as she stood stoic, silent, yet strong. She knew she should not be standing there alone; it took *two* to be guilty of this act. Yet he was nowhere to be found, cowardly, afraid. She looked up at them, forcing them to make eye contact, trying to make them *see* her---someone's sister, daughter, wife, lover, friend. But they did not. They masked her humanity with insults, with hatred. Her trembling body began to absorb the venom.

"Adulterer!" "Whore" "Harlot"! They cried, pushing against each other, laughing, angry. Their boorish behavior echoed the arrogant, self-importance of all those who have ever accused, have ever punished, have ever justified their own ignorance or lack of compassion by insulting the humanity of another.

"How could you?" "What were you thinking" "How stupid," these people say. "What kind of father? What kind of mother? What kind of daughter, son, sister, brother does these things?" The crowd grew larger, attracting attention and *more* voices joined the throng. I realized then that neither of us could look up any longer as we ingested their poison: "I knew you'd never

amount to anything”, “You never loved me”, “You messed up my life!” “You’re an abomination, a sinner, a freak; you’re going to hell!”

The shouting continued. It was no longer about *this* woman, about *this* relationship: it was about all women, all relationships, about everyone and everything and it was about no one and no-thing at all.

“Liar! Cheat! Drunk! Addict! Why can’t you be straight like normal people? Why can’t you get a job? Why don’t you go back to where you came from? How could you do that? What were you thinking? You believe what? What makes you think you can....”

I saw myself shrinking alongside her, alongside *everyone* who has ever stood in such a circle, *everyone* who has ever faced such unwarranted judgment, such uncontrolled anger, such projected brokenness....

Yet all the while, Jesus stood there, listening, watching. Until he sunk to his knees and began scratching in the dirt. They pushed in to see what he was doing, turning their hot-breathed hatred and their sweaty faces on *him* as they demanded a response. Standing again, he finally spoke: “OK, ok....” The sinless one among you, go first: *Throw the stone.*” And bending down again, he went back to writing in the dirt.

The crowd got quiet. “What did he say?” They repeated his words for one another: “The sinless one among you, *go first: throw the stone.*” “Ha! Right! None of us is as bad as *she* is! Go ahead!” some cried. But before anyone did, some began walking away.

Bewilderment turned to resignation as one by one, they realized their plot had failed; they could not catch him. If he had pronounced her “guilty”, he would have been usurping *Roman* authority. If he had declared her “sinner”, he would have been claiming *divine* authority. He did

neither; he did nothing at all but give them permission to show themselves shameless. And they could not.

“Woman, where are they?” He asked. “Does no one condemn you?”

“No one, Master,” she replied.

“Neither do I,” said Jesus. “Go on your way. From now on, don’t sin.”

And that was the end. Or rather...it was the *beginning*. It was the beginning of forgiving herself, myself, ourselves. Of taking responsibility for who and what we have said, done, failed to do or be. It is beginning of letting go of the past, of the mistakes we’ve made, the hurts we’ve caused, the wrongs we could not right. It is the beginning of learning again, or maybe for the very first time, to love ourselves, this business of forgiving ourselves.

Jesus’ words to the crowd invite them to take responsibility for their own actions; these men want Jesus to do their dirty work, to condemn and execute and he refuses. Instead he turns it back on them: take responsibility for your own actions, your own hate. The woman who stood alone in spite of the law’s requirement that the man face the same punishment, also is freed to take responsibility for her actions: you are not condemned. Go, live! Just don’t do this anymore.

We talk all the time about forgiving others, but what about forgiving ourselves? We know that not forgiving others is harmful; it breeds resentment, yet if we don’t forgive ourselves, it deepens shame and guilt, and becomes a breeding ground for pathological self-blame. Self-forgiveness is a process. “Genuine self-forgiveness leads to psychological and, perhaps even more profoundly, spiritual growth. In the forgiveness literature, the process of forgiving is often characterized as that of the re-establishment of relationships with others, with self, and with that which is sacred or divine.... Interestingly, the emotion that forgiveness involves is love. Self-

forgiveness means transcending your anger at yourself with love, with viewing yourself with empathy.” (Psychology Today <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/emotional-nourishment/201704/forgiving-yourself>)

If no one condemns, not even Jesus, why is it so difficult for me to forgive myself? If no one is perfect, then why am I holding myself hostage to an ideal that not even *God* expects? If no one has the right to throw the stone against another why do I continue to berate myself...why don't I walk away from my past, from whatever I have said, done, been, or failed to be...what stops me from liberating myself in the likeness of Jesus, who does not condemn but who invites me to be whole? This business of forgiving ourselves is difficult...much more so than forgiving someone else. For them, we give slack, explanation, exceptions.... but not ourselves. What *would* it take to forgive yourself?

What would it take to forgive yourself?

It would take silencing the voices in our heads that tell us we aren't good enough, worthy enough, valuable enough to be set free.

It would take complete surrender to being *human*, not perfect, not morally, spiritually, psychologically better than anyone else. It would mean accepting failure and living to tell about it. Embracing it even, as a part of the human experience.

To forgive ourselves would take *believing Jesus* when he says he/God does not condemn us, even though we've got bible verses and preachers and teachers and society and the past and the present trying to tell us differently. **It takes believing the words “neither do I” and “go on your way; be whole” are said to us, for us. And for *our* healing.**

What would it take to forgive ourselves? It would mean we would need to be *kind* to ourselves, *gentle* to ourselves, *loving* to ourselves. It might take us a long time to do this; it might take a life time to do this. But it's where we must start.

Dare to begin to forgive yourself...pray for the courage to step outside the circle of voices that try to condemn you, *including your own voice*, and hear instead the voice of Jesus:

“Does no one condemn you?”

“No one, Master.”

“Neither do I,” said Jesus. “Go on your way. From now on, don't sin.”