

Beginning Again

John 8:1-11

John Breon

I wish that there were some wonderful place
Called the Land of Beginning Again
Where all our mistakes and all our heartaches
And all of our selfish grief
Could be dropped like a shabby old coat by the door
And never be put on again

(Louise Fletcher Tarkington)

Most of us can identify with the poet's desire. Aren't there times you wish for a "do-over," a chance to begin again? We fail to find or do God's will. We realize our self-sufficient efforts aren't enough. Some sin separates us from God, from ourselves, from those around us and we need a fresh start, a new beginning.

Years ago, I read a sermon that used John Steinbeck's novel *The Winter of Our Discontent* as an illustration. It's the story of Ethan Allen Hawley, a man who's not satisfied with his position in life. So he uses dishonest means and he sacrifices his integrity to get ahead. Then he decides that he can't live with the guilt over what he's done. He goes to his favorite place under a pier, planning to slit his wrists as the tide comes in. But when he reaches into his pocket for the razor blades, he finds a small stone that his daughter had given him. He realizes that he has to return it to her and so he determines to live. The sermon I read makes this point:

Then across the deep comes a life-changing revelation for Ethan Allen Hawley—a revelation of the redemptive power of unconditional love. Suddenly he knows the most important truth of his life. Guilt is not the signal to quit, but it is the signal to begin! Struggling through the churning tide, he goes back to shore to begin again. (L. D. Thomas, *How the Bible Can Help You* 86-87)

Our own guilt signals our need for freedom to begin again—the freedom of forgiveness. The woman in this story found it. Let’s listen to her story again. We’ll see more of who Jesus is through what he did for her. I want us to know him better and experience for ourselves the kind of new beginnings he offers.

A woman is dragged out and thrust at Jesus’ feet. She’s been caught *in the act* of adultery. The Jewish Law, that came through Moses, prescribed the death penalty for such a case. A married woman having sex with a man she was not married to was to be stoned to death (Deut 22:21-24; Lev 20:10). The scribes and Pharisees are asking for Jesus’ opinion about this woman whom they accuse of adultery.

A question that leaps to mind is, where was the man? We have to conclude that the woman was set up and used by the scribes and Pharisees in order to trap Jesus. They weren’t as concerned about the woman and justice as with putting Jesus in a dilemma.

Here at the beginning of this chapter, the scribes and Pharisees want to stone this woman. Throughout chapter eight, the tone turns darker. The dispute between Jesus and various groups in Jerusalem gets more intense. Some of Jesus’ harshest words are in this chapter. Then, at the end of the chapter, the crowd wants to stone Jesus.

But here at the beginning, they’re trying to trap Jesus. If Jesus condoned stoning the woman, he would contradict his message of love and compassion and likely violate Roman law. If he opposed the stoning he would deny justice and contradict Jewish law.

But Jesus doesn’t answer directly. He stoops and writes in the dirt with his finger. What an odd response. What’s Jesus doing? He’s creating a space, a moment, when everyone can cool down, hear his word, and think about it.

But the religious leaders are impatient and demand that he answer their question. Jesus straightens up and faces them with the answer: “Let any one of you who is without sin throw the first stone.” Then he stoops and begins writing again.

We have no idea what he wrote. There’s been a lot of speculation. Maybe he wrote down the sins of those scribes and Pharisees, perhaps the

commandments they had broken. His writing with his finger reminds us of God writing the Ten Commandments with his finger (Ex 31:18; Deut 9:10). As so often, Michael Card has written a song that helps us enter into the episode:

Amidst a mob of madmen, she stood frightened and alone
As hate-filled voices hissed at Him that she should now be stoned
But in the air around Him hung a vast and wordless love
Who knows what luminous lesson He was in the middle of

At first He faced the fury of their self-righteous scorn
But then He stooped and at once became the calm eye of the storm
It was His wordless answer to their dark and cruel demand
A lifetime in a moment, as He scribbled in the sand

It was silence, it was music
It was art, it was absurd
He stooped and shouted volumes
Without saying a single word
The same finger of a strong hand
That had written ten commands
For now was simply scribbling in the sand

Within the space of space and time He'd scribbled in the sand
They came to hear and see as much as they could understand
Now bound by cords of kindness they couldn't cast a single stone
And Jesus and the woman found that they were all alone

Could that same Finger come and trace my soul's sacred sand
And make some unexpected space where I could understand
That my own condemnation pierced and broke that gentle Hand
That scratched the words I'll never know
Written in the sand

(Scribbling in the Sand: Christ and Creativity, 2002)

Whatever Jesus wrote, he challenged the conscience of the accusers. They should be embarrassed, not Jesus. And his ruling about adultery shifts the law's imbalance that favored men over women who had little status and few rights. Jesus shows the wisdom that kings were expected to display. One of the questions in this whole part of John's Gospel is whether Jesus is the Messiah, the true King. He doesn't say that the Law of Moses was wrong. But he does say that if we're serious about it, we should all find ourselves guilty.

There's silence and then the thudding of stones being dropped and the shuffling of feet as the religious leaders get the point and turn to leave one by one.

Where do we see ourselves in this story?

In the scribes and Pharisees?

They had already passed judgment on the woman. They ask Jesus to pass judgment on her. Instead, he turns their judgment back on them. God won't approve our judgment of others because we're inadequate to judge. God knows something about people's situations that we don't. God knows a person's heart. God knows everything about every one of us—what we think, what we feel, what we want, what we do, what we fail to do. Does that threaten you or comfort you?

Jesus shows us that God is loving *and* holy, gracious *and* just. God's love and grace don't shut out justice, but they reach beyond justice to forgive us. Jesus said that God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him (John 3:17).

God cuts through the condemnation that we hold over ourselves and others. We're not God. We must receive the forgiveness that God wants to give more than we want to ask, and then share it with each other.

Possibly the scribes and Pharisees were so harsh because they weren't assured that God had forgiven their sin. Failing to receive forgiveness for ourselves makes forgiving others difficult.

Do we see ourselves in the woman's experience?

We can identify with her guilt and shame. Our sins and failures put us with her at the feet of Jesus.

But listen to what Jesus said to her after her accusers left. "Where are they? Has no one condemned you?" In amazement she looks around to see that all of them are gone. "No one, sir." She is free of her accusers.

Now keep identifying with her. See Jesus look you in the eye and hear him say, "Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more."

Jesus doesn't condemn her—he expresses grace and forgiveness. He doesn't condemn her because he will be condemned for her. At the same time, Jesus doesn't condone her sin—he upholds righteousness.

What this woman received can also be ours: Forgiveness. We all need it and one of the first steps to receiving forgiveness is to admit our need for it. God offers forgiveness to us freely before we ask. God's grace revealed in Christ shows how willing God is to forgive. God is more willing to forgive than we are to sin.

We mustn't take sin lightly. The remedy for sin—the cross—shows how desperate the situation was. God went that far to forgive and redeem us.

Forgiveness is the miracle of a new beginning. It doesn't deny the past, but it creates a new future. Forgiveness includes freedom to leave the past behind. We don't have to carry the weight of our yesterdays into our tomorrows.

We're even free to forget. God doesn't erase our minds, but he heals our memories. When we recall our sins and failures, we can recall God's forgiveness of them. We can remember them without the sting of shame and guilt.

We're not only free from the past, but we're also free for a new future. "Go and leave your life of sin" or "Go and sin no more" is the freedom to live a new life. This new life with God in Christ is full of new beginnings and fresh starts. Forgiveness doesn't condone sin; it actually condemns it. God doesn't simply cover over our sin; he roots it out. God not only forgives us, he transforms us. God wants to give us grace and power to overcome the sins that have held us captive.

We're free to experience God's forgiveness every time we sin. God always offers a fresh start and a new beginning. We don't have to go all the way back to where we started, but we can pick up where we left off. In an ongoing, growing relationship with Christ, we continue to repent and receive his forgiveness.

In relationship with God in Christ, we have freedom as we relate to others and to ourselves. We're free from the condemnation and judgment of others because the One whose opinion really matters declares that he loves and forgives us. We're free from self-condemnation. If God has forgiven us, we can forgive ourselves. We have no right to play God by refusing to forgive. If God's grace is the basis of our relating to God, we are free from God's judgment.

All of that sets us free to forgive others, to share the love and grace of God we've received. Remember Corrie ten Boom. After World War II, she was speaking in a church and met one of the former concentration camp guards who had helped imprison and humiliate her and her sister. He was asking for forgiveness and she couldn't give it—until she prayed and asked God to forgive through her. Then, she said it felt like electric current running down her arm as she extended her hand to the man (*The Hiding Place* 238).

Michael Card comments on the fact that the man who sinned with this woman is missing from the story:

There is good reason for his not appearing. He is you and me! We are, every one of us, as guilty as the man who got away. We think we have escaped, when, in fact, we are as good as dead unless we find our way to that One, sitting alone in the temple court, with stones scattered at His feet, writing thoughtfully with His finger in the sand. (*Immanuel* 109)

Prayer/Examination of Conscience

Lord, am I often more like the Pharisees than like Jesus?—quick to condemn, using people to advance my cause, stupidly questioning you and your authority.

Or am I more like the woman?—cringing in embarrassment and shame, knowing I'm guilty, knowing I'm caught, knowing the consequences and fearing them. I jump when the stones start thudding on the ground. I stare with surprise and amazement at your word of grace.

Can I be more like Jesus?—full of integrity, angry at the Pharisees' plot, not willing to shame the woman or condemn her, speaking words of grace and forgiveness and challenge.

Jesus, you know my sins—I can't condemn anyone else. You know my sins—yet you don't condemn me. You free me from the past and you open up a new future in which I can go and sin no more.