

# “The Light of Life”

*Valley Presbyterian Church – April 15, 2018*

Third Sunday of Easter

I John 3:1-3

Rev. John Wahl

John 8:1-12

The three epistles – or letters – of John, if not written by the same author as the Gospel of John, at least come from the same community. Most biblical scholars agree that they were written about a decade after the Gospel to address a threat that was fracturing the church. The author’s purpose, therefore, is to root out these splintering notions and urge unity; warning them of the dangers of the world, while instructing about the power love to conquer all for those who abide in Christ. *See what love the Father has given us, we heard from I John, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are.* (v. 1)

In John’s Gospel, Jesus offers seven of what are called “I am” statements; such as, *I am the bread of life, I am the good shepherd, and I am the way, the truth, and the life.* Today, we hear Jesus saying, *I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.* (v. 12) Because Jesus is the light of the world, we – who are in the world – need never walk in darkness, but as children of God, and as followers of Jesus and his way in the world, we will instead have the light of life.

But before we reach this statement, we find a remarkable story about judgement and forgiveness as the Pharisees bring before Jesus a woman who has been accused of adultery. As Raymond Brown describes it, “the delicate balance between the justice of Jesus not condoning the sin and his mercy in forgiving the sin is one of the great gospel lessons.”<sup>1</sup>

You might remember last Sunday’s gospel reading, from the 20<sup>th</sup> chapter of John, when – on the night of the resurrection – Jesus appears to his disciples (minus Doubting Thomas) who had locked themselves behind closed doors out of fear. After first showing them his wounds, and offering them a message of peace, commissioning and equipping them with the Holy Spirit, Jesus then says something we sometimes overlook. He tells his disciples that *If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.* (v. 23)

These words are sometimes viewed as more mystical than practical; we sometimes think of forgiveness as something nice, but not necessary. Instead, Jesus seems here to be saying that forgiveness really matters; that the mercy we may choose to extend, or not to

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<sup>1</sup> As quoted by Francis Taylor Gench in *Encounters with Jesus*

extend, will have a real impact both on us and on our neighbors. If we “retain” the sins of others; if we make a judgement or hold on to a grudge, the light of love cannot fully break through the darkness.

Looking back at today’s reading from chapter 8, then, we see Jesus talking again about the importance of forgiveness and, likewise, the danger of judgement. Before him stands an angry mob and the Pharisees who bring this presumed guilty woman who, as we are told, has been caught in the act. According to ancient Jewish law, if guilty, she would be given a judgement of death by stoning; if, that is, there were witnesses present to testify against her and her partner, who should rightfully be given the same sentence.

But neither of these legal standards are being met. We’re told, in fact, that the Pharisees are testing Jesus, trying to find a reason to bring charges against him. The angry crowd that has gathered is therefore merely a tool for their devious means.

Before Jesus speaks, though, we are offered a very curious detail about this encounter. He is described as bending over, writing unknown words in the dust on the ground. “What on earth is he doing?” asks Rowan Williams; and then – answering his own question – continues, saying:

*There is one meaning that seems obvious to me. He hesitates. He does not draw a line, fix an interpretation, tell the woman who she is and what her fate should be. He allows a moment, a longish moment, in which people are given time to see themselves differently precisely because he refuses to make the sense they want. When he lifts his head, there is both judgement and release.<sup>2</sup>*

The first thing that Jesus does when confronted with this challenging situation is to pause. Instead of taking sides, lashing out, or running away, Jesus stops to give time for the light of life to shine in a place of darkness; before offering his famous proclamation – *Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her* – he waits to allow those in the crowd to feel the heft of the rock in their hand, and to look and see before them a person: a beloved child of God who just like each of them has at some time faltered, failed and fallen short.

Though they had arrived on the scene as an undifferentiated mob, we are told that after dropping their stones, the people depart *one by one* (v.8), as individuals who have been disarmed and redirected to look inward and to discern from their own personal histories whether they are truly in a position to condemn.

All of us make hundreds, if not thousands, of judgements every day – which way will be faster, which coat will be warmer, what line is shorter, what medicine is better?

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<sup>2</sup> As quoted by Francis Taylor Gench in *Encounters with Jesus*

But our Christian faith warns us time and again about the dangers of judging others, lest we be judged ourselves. For it is not possible to love other people unless we understand at a very deep level that our own human failings put us all in the same boat. Everyone falls short of the glory of God; we can only love others because the love of God has been revealed to us.

This story comes to us in a week where the United States and its allies have launched missile attacks in war-torn Syria in the aftermath of chemical weapons attacks perpetrated by the government against its own citizens. Within our own government, there is an ongoing debate about the role of the legislative and executive branches in taking these actions. Judgements have been and will continue to be made, with serious and potentially dangerous consequences. As Christian citizens of the nation and the world, we must continue to strive for justice and peace, and pray for all who have been placed in harm's way.

And, as followers of Jesus, we look to his words and his way in order to walk in this world as beacons of the light of life that shines in the darkness. In the ways that we relate with each other, forgiveness brings us together while judgmentalism disrupts community; it destroys those who do the judging, and it often destroys (and excludes from community) the one who is judged. "As a breach of love," Roberta Bondi argues, "judgmentalism is as serious as any other sin we might commit against one another."<sup>3</sup>

How can we be freed from a judging spirit? This story about casting the first stone suggests that knowing ourselves for the sinners we are is foundational to our ability to extend ourselves in love and compassion to others, and perhaps to ourselves as well. We all share a common struggle against, even if not always with the same form of, sin. We really are in the same boat.

And so, the amazing part of this story is not just that the members of the mob choose to drop their stones and walk away, but that Jesus treats everyone with the same level of mercy and respect: the accused woman, the people of the crowd, and the Pharisees. So, whether you are a sinner, an impassioned observer, or a skeptic – or maybe, at times, all three – Jesus loves you and wants you to experience the light of life; the freedom of release that can come when, instead of retaining the sins of others and judging them, we forgive them so that they, and we ourselves, can participate in the joyful experience of forgiveness.

This story, of course, does not make forgiveness easy to do. Often, it feels reassuring to hold a stone in our hand; or to focus on the failures of others, rather than our own. Sometimes, retaliation feels just and right. But in our all-too-conflicted world, Jesus is offering us a different way, an alternate reality, one that is based not just on how

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<sup>3</sup> Roberta Bondi, *To Pray and to Love*

well we do at loving each other, but upon the quality and depth of love that God has shown us.

Maybe, as his followers, we are being called to pause and to consider what words Jesus might be writing in the dust. Are they a list of our own sins which, by God's grace, disappear like scattered dust when the wind blows? Or are they a reminder of the great sacrifice Jesus willingly makes for us; and that we are called also to carry a cross? Or is this a gesture that speaks even more loudly than words; showing us once again that Jesus, our Lord, is willing to bend down on his knees, even to wash our feet; desiring not to be served, but to serve?

Maybe, then, if forgiveness feels to you like too large a first step, it could be preceded by finding a way to serve; to love others by offering yourself to them. Jesus did not have to tell the people in the crowd that particular day to put down their stones, but – one by one – they did, letting the moment of judgement pass because they had been shown a different and better way. Thanks be to God. AMEN.