ARE YOU A STONE THROWER?

John 8: 2-11

September 18, 2016

Today’s Gospel text is so hot that the early Church did not accept it until about the sixth century. I guess the thinking was, if we told people that Jesus went around accepting people who had committed adultery, then people might get the idea that adultery is not all that bad. Well, it is a dramatic scene. The scribes and Pharisees pulled a woman away from the very act of adultery. She was probably standing before Jesus, the crowd, and the leering religious leaders clutching whatever makeshift piece of clothing she had been able to pull around herself. But their primary concern was not the woman or her sin.

The question they posed to Jesus was meant to entrap him. They pointed out to Jesus that the Jewish law said such a woman should be stoned to death. What did he say? The dilemma they were putting to Jesus is that if he agreed to her being stoned, he would be undermining his foundational teaching on loving grace. Then, they could have held Jesus and his teachings up to ridicule. Not only that, he was going against the Roman law, which forbade the Jews to carry out any capital punishment on their own. But, if Jesus said that the woman should not be stoned, he would be going against the Jewish law and could be accused of breaking of the revered Law of Moses.

So, Jesus was being set up in an airtight conundrum and he did a peculiar thing. He squatted down and started drawing lines in the sand. This gesture of squatting was what Jewish men did to show their utter disinterest in the topic at hand. Jesus was saying by this gesture, “I choose not to get involved in your hypocritical kangaroo court.” But, when he was pushed into an answer, he said something that was a stroke of genius. In essence, he said, "I recognize the Jewish laws and the Roman laws; but if you are so eager to see this woman stoned, let the one who has never committed a sin cast the first stone." And, Jesus went on drawing lines in the sand

The religious leaders took a few moments to reflect. I think this might be a good time for us to reflect. So let me ask you, who is the terrible sinner in your life who you would bring before Jesus? "I can't seem to get anywhere with this person Jesus... maybe you could give it a try." Come on, we all have people in our lives who could use some work. Our lives are filled with all sorts of folks. And sometimes, we don't always get along. Sometimes. we do not even like each other. Sometimes, we can really hurt one another. And Jesus says, “if you are having problems accepting someone else take a good look deep within yourself.

Condemnation and judgment have become so deeply rooted in the human spirit that most of us can't imagine having to function without them. We must let people know how much we disapprove of them; particularly those we don't like. And of course, we are richly rewarded by the sense of superiority such condemnation breeds in us. You may be angry. You may be hurt. You may feel indignant. You may be offended by someone; their ideas, actions, values, lifestyle. The first thing to do, according to Jesus, is to take a long, deep, even prayerful look into yourself.

So, do you have any stones you need to put down? Maybe against a relative or against an ex-spouse or against a boss or coworker or against someone who has hurt you. Maybe you have carried the stone for so long you don't remember life without it. Maybe you have worked hard and long on it gathering incriminating evidence experiencing righteous anger and now your stone is highly polished. Maybe it has weighed you down so that you have found yourself generalizing
who and what you can accept. Or maybe it is so much a part of you that you don't even notice it. But, do you find yourself thinking things along the order of, “I've known sports fans who were drunken bullies at the game. I'll never go anywhere with a drunken bully. So forget going to the game.” We once had a Republican Congressman who was so wrapped up in scandal, I will only vote Democratic.” You get the idea. Well, my friends, Jesus is very clear that before you throw a stone; before you exclude someone, condemn someone, hurt someone, look into your own heart.

Acceptance is an act of the heart. To accept someone is to affirm to them that you think it's a very good thing they are alive. They are valued and respected for who they are. Jesus did the most gracious thing near the end of our reading. He recognized the woman as a sister deserving respect. He saw her sinfulness and still accepted her. Jesus had no rocks to throw. Jesus said to the woman, "Where are all the stone throwers? Has no one accused you?" The woman probably hung her head when she answered softly, "No one, sir." Then Jesus showed his divine mercy in saying, "Neither do I. Go on your way and sin no more." Jesus demonstrated his confidence in this woman's goodness, that she was repentant and would not commit this sin again. I imagine that his words filled her with hope because they let her know that someone believes in her and there is chance to grasp hold of life again.

Let’s pause for a moment to be clear that accepting a person is not the same thing as approving all of one's behavior. Nor is acceptance, the same as toleration. Someone may tolerate me, may put up with my existence and even my faults, but that’s not a true caring relationship. People need more than toleration. Bertrand Russell wrote, "A sense of duty is useful in work but offensive in personal relationships. People wish to be liked, not to be endured with patient resignation."

Jesus showed us that acceptance is not the same thing as putting up with any behavior someone chooses to indulge in. There are some who think acceptance means an abused wife has to tolerate whatever suffering her spouse inflicts, a concerned friend must watch in silence as her friend makes choices that will wreck her life, or a family must endure indulgent substance abuse behavior. But my friends, accepting another person does not mean we refuse to confront or challenge that in them which could harm others and damage their soul. To accept weaknesses is not fatalistic and hopeless acceptance. Essentially, it is a concern for the truth and a challenge to become transformed. Jesus accepted the woman in this morning's text. He forgave her sin, because it is not possible to offer acceptance yet withhold forgiveness. But this acceptance and forgiveness came at enormous cost to himself. In defending her, he has made powerful enemies. "Go - and sin no more." Jesus’ acceptance is free, undeserved; but it is also demanding. For the woman to fully embrace her acceptance will require entering into a whole new way of life.

Amazingly enough, radical acceptance does what condemnation and judgment and self-superiority cannot do. It often changes a life. Imagine what might happen in our little corner of the world if we were to adopt the way of Jesus. What if we were to cease attacking people's worth or holding them in contempt? Imagine being known as one who will never pick up a stone. I searched and searched for the source of these words and couldn’t find it. But, I share them with you and encourage you to reflect on radical and gracious acceptance. Because I accept you, I respect your individuality. I accept that you have a right to your own opinion. You may differ with me without fear that I will no longer accept you if we do not see eye to eye. We can disagree and still belong to each other and to God. Because I accept you, I will not sit idly by and watch you hurt yourself or others. I will speak the truth with love and offer you my assistance in transforming your life. Because I accept you, I shall not steal people’s good opinion
of you. I will not push you down in order to lift myself. Rather, I offer you the opportunity to forge ahead of me without envy or jealously. I will even to give you a helpful boost. Because I accept you, I will offer you a “taking off” place. Though I value your friendship, I will not bind you so closely to me that you will lose the wealth of other friendships, or fail to develop your own best potential. I offer you special help in time of special need; my hand, my ear, my voice. I offer you the gospel of Christ. I offer it to you to prove its power to the fullest, that the Lord may challenge and encourage you by the sight of what God has done for the through me. With God's help, I shall offer an abounding love that will meet those unforeseen and unexpected demands of emergency and that will save me from holding too tightly to the “Thou shalt’s” and “I must’s.”

My friends, we all possess the power to transform others with our loving acceptance or to devastate others with our righteous judgment and condemnation. The power that you and I have to hurt is diabolical. But, the power we have to heal is infinite. We possess the power of Christ's love. If we have the courage to take step away from our self-centeredness and our clinging to our own stony prejudices; if we step into the Love of Jesus Christ, we can become co-creators and transformers with Christ.

The life of the woman caught in adultery was radically changed by the man who did not condemn her but accepted her and challenged her; empowered her with hope and a new vision of herself. Jesus was more concerned with who she was than what she had done. And she found reason to respect herself for she learned from Jesus that she was lovable and she was loved. This is how Jesus loves each of us. This is how Jesus calls upon us to love and accept each other