

Rooted in Justice, Mercy, and Faithfulness
(Lent 5)

Prayer of Illumination

Present God,

Settle our hearts.

Still our minds.

And stir our imaginations,

That we might hear your Word for us this day. Amen.

John 8:2-11

Early in the morning he came again to the temple. All the people came to him, and he sat down and began to teach them. The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery, and, making her stand before all of them, they said to him, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground. When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders, and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. Jesus straightened up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" She said, "No one, sir." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again."

Matthew 23:23

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cumin but have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others.

The Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Rooted in Justice, Mercy, and Faithfulness

On November 13, 2015, the city of Paris experienced coordinated terrorist attacks that killed over 130 people and injured hundreds more. It was one of those news events that shook the Western world and left many of us aware of just how unsafe we might be going about our daily lives. In the days that followed, Facebook rolled out a feature that allowed its users to overlay the French tricolor flag on their profile picture as a gesture of solidarity. It seemed an obvious and easy way to signal support. And it started a trend—one that has repeated itself dozens of times since. With every tragedy or controversy that breaks through the noise, a flag overlay, a hashtag, a frame, a color, a quick, symbolic way to show where you stand.

Only, ... the day before the Paris attacks, suicide bombers had struck Beirut killing dozens. And it quickly became evident that putting a French flag over your profile picture showed support for Paris, but also risked implying that some attacks were more worthy of our attention than others, that some lives mattered more than others.

I don't honestly remember if I chose to change my profile picture on Facebook that first time. What I do remember is the dozens of times since then when I've debated about whether or not I should update my status or adjust my profile picture in response to a particular event or controversy.

It's a question that follows me into the pulpit more often than I'd like. What situations warrant a statement from the pulpit? When does silence signal complicity?

The choice in 2015, the choice that has repeated itself in various forms ever since, was this: change my profile picture and implicitly rank some lives above others, or don't change it and risk seeming indifferent to the violent deaths of 130 people. Neither option felt right. And the moment moved too fast to find a third way.

The question the religious leaders brought to Jesus in our passage from John this morning forced a similar choice. A woman had been caught in adultery. According to the laws of Moses, justice required that she be stoned. But if Jesus advocated stoning, he'd align himself with a harsh reading of the law and risk drawing Roman attention. On the other hand, if he opted for mercy, he'd be seen as dismissing the laws of Moses. It was a lose-lose choice for Jesus, which was just what the authorities wanted.

But Jesus wasn't the only one caught inside the trap. There was the woman. Hauled into the temple and made to stand before everyone, she is completely ignored. Her accusers never give her a chance to defend herself or tell her version of the story, they never even address her. She is there because she is useful—the right kind of case at the right kind of moment, a person who could be used as a trap for Jesus. She is collateral damage so unremarkable that the text doesn't even bother to give her a name.

And yet, one scholar notes, “some form of this woman’s story has been played out for centuries by countless thousands of women—her name is legion.” She is every person who has ever been hauled into the center of an argument that does not require their presence in order to render a ruling. She is everyone caught in legal or religious systems that have become more concerned with verdicts than the humanity of the people inside them.

Because systems, even well-intentioned ones, over time, tend to focus in on procedures, often at the expense of people. It is a situation Jesus names in our text from Matthew this morning: “Woe to you hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cumin, but have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice, mercy, and faithfulness.”

By Jesus’ time, the religious systems created to ensure the law was being followed had become so intent on making sure every letter was observed precisely, down to tithing the last sprig of mint and seed of cumin, they had lost sight of the weightier matters: justice, mercy, and faithfulness. They weren’t being neglected out of malice; they had simply gotten lost in a system that wanted to do things correctly, a system so focused on getting the small things right that it had lost sight of the people inside it.

In seminary, one of our preaching professors used to make her class act out the story of Jesus and the woman accused of adultery. People always got stuck trying to figure out what Jesus was writing in the dirt: the law of Moses? The sins of the accusers? Doodles? What they eventually discovered, however, was that it didn’t matter what Jesus was writing, what mattered was what happened when Jesus bent down.

When Jesus bends down, he removes himself from the center of the confrontation. With a single movement he changes the focus of the scene. The accusers, who came to trap Jesus, are suddenly forced to face the woman they had hauled in as a prop. And in at same time, Jesus slows the whole encounter down. By bending down and writing in the sand, he introduces time into a system designed to operate at speed, to force either/or choices, to demand snap decisions. He doesn’t argue with the accusers, doesn’t debate the law with them, doesn’t engage them at all. Instead, he drains the momentum out of the system long enough for the woman caught in the middle to become visible.

It must have been an uncomfortable moment. The accusers came ready to argue, but Jesus gives them nothing to argue against—only themselves, and the woman, and silence.

And when they push, when Jesus does respond, he refuses to engage them on their terms, refuses to become the judge they want him to be. Instead, he turns the decision back on them: let anyone without sin throw the first stone.

And they start to walk away. One by one, beginning with the elders. The ones who have lived long enough to know exactly what Jesus was writing in that dirt, whether or not he wrote a single word. Until it is just Jesus and the woman who had been brought as a sacrifice. And Jesus does what no one else has, he speaks to the woman.

He doesn't question her, doesn't ask for her version of events, he simply asks, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" He even makes sure she hears him say, "neither do I condemn you." Because this was never about the woman and what she did or didn't do—she was a prop in someone else's argument. What Jesus does do is refuse to leave her there. He speaks to her directly. He asks about her present reality, not her past actions. And in doing so, he offers her what the entire proceeding has denied her: not a verdict, but her humanity.

It's tempting to read Jesus's final words to the woman—"go your way, and from now on do not sin again"—as a polite moral judgment, proof that the woman, while clearly a victim, was also a little bit to blame for her situation. But writer Sarah Bessey points out that Jesus uses the same phrase elsewhere in John when he heals a man by telling him to pick up his mat and walk. Later, after the religious authorities have questioned the man, Jesus finds the man again and says the same thing to him: "go and sin no more" followed by the phrase, "so that nothing worse happens to you." Jesus' statement is not an accusation; it is a warning. Both the man and the woman have been caught in the crosshairs of a conflict between Jesus and the authorities. And in both cases Jesus sends them away not with a verdict, but with a quiet word of warning: be careful, watch your back.

We would like to think that we are somewhere outside of this story. That we are watching it from a safe distance, recognizing the trap for what it is, grateful that Jesus refuses it. But the systems that convert people into cases, and cases into binaries (good/bad, guilty/not guilty), and binaries into verdicts—those systems did not die in the temple that morning. We still live inside them. Far from watching them at a safe distance, we participate in them. Sometimes we are the ones who build them.

Consider the criminal justice system in this country. It is a system that asks one question—guilty or not guilty—and applies consequences accordingly. It is a system designed to be exquisitely precise about its procedures and structurally indifferent about the results.

But the results are human lives: prisons overflowing with people—many who made a mistake, many who are poor or people of color. A system designed to produce verdicts will always struggle to hold the full complexity of a human life. Of course consequences matter, accountability matters. But faithfulness asks a deeper question: how do we build systems that hold justice and mercy together, systems that do not require us to choose between what someone did and who someone is?

Which brings us back to 2015. Back to the Paris attacks and the Beirut suicide bombers and the question of whether or not to use a specific filter on Facebook, back to the question that follows me into this pulpit every time the world breaks open and I wonder what needs to be said from this place, back to the question of what faithfulness looks like in systems that move fast and want to force us into snap decisions.

Unfortunately, there is no formula. No algorithm that tells us when silence is harmless and when it is complicit. No instruction manual for holding justice and mercy simultaneously in a world that wants us to choose, and choose quickly.

What we do have—what Jesus demonstrated in the temple that morning—is the practice of faithfulness. Faithfulness isn't a value we hold or a position we take. It is slowing down when the systems around us want us to speed up. It is resisting binary, either/or choices. It is the ongoing, never-quite-finished practice of asking what justice and mercy together require—not in the abstract, but in this situation, for this person right now.

It is hard work and it never ends. But it is the weightier thing—the thing that too easily gets neglected, the thing the gospel keeps calling us back to. Because of the woman—the one who left the temple that morning with her personhood restored, the one whose name is legion because she is everyone who has ever been ground up by a system that cared more about verdicts than people. It is the work Jesus demonstrated when he knelt in the dirt and refused to let the system have the last word. It is what keeps us rooted in justice, mercy, and faithfulness.

Amen.