



Westminster Presbyterian Church Knoxville, TN
 March 22, 2026
 The 5th Sunday of Lent
 The Rev. Dr. Richard Coble
 Sermon: "As God Sees"

Monday, last week I went to the dentist.

And you know, I'm not the type of Presbyterian minister who believes in total depravity.

Total depravity being the old Calvinist belief that all humanity is totally lost to sin without God.

I'm Presbyterian, but...eh. I'm not so sure.

You know who I think believes in total depravity? My dentist.

I know what you're thinking. 'Richard, we've got some dentists here in our congregation. You need to tread lightly here.'

Look. I know. We have some dentists in our congregation.

And I want them all to know, that after Monday, I forgive them. And love them anyway.

This is how I know that my dentist believes in total depravity.

I tell my dentist, every time I see him, that I floss.

Do I really floss?

Sometimes.

Does anyone really floss all the time?

I tell my dentist I floss, every time I see him.

He doesn't believe me.

This is how I know:

After all the specialized scrubbing, picking, ultrasonic brushing.

This is what he does:

He gets out floss, and he flosses my teeth for me.

As if he doesn't trust me to do it for myself.

Isn't it weird that the dentist flosses your teeth?

What better evidence is there, that

All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God?

Anyway, *Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone.*

That's what Jesus says. As we turn to our Scripture reading.

In the book of John. Hear the word of God.

John 8:2-11 (NRSVue)

² Early in the morning [Jesus] came again to the temple. All the people came to him, and he sat down and began to teach them. ³ The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery, and, making her stand before all of them, ⁴ they said to him, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. ⁵ Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" ⁶

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.

⁷ 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." ⁸ And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground. ⁹ 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.

¹⁰ Jesus straightened up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" ¹¹ She said, "No one, sir." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again."

Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone.

Maybe Jesus believes in total depravity too.
He seems to, here, at least.
And why shouldn't he?

Is there any better illustration of sin in the whole Bible?

Of course, I mean the crowds here, not the woman.

When it comes to the woman, plenty of thoughts should be coming to our head.

Like first:

Does it not take two to tango?

Why is she singled out?

And not just singled out, but threatened with death.
All for what?

They said [all] this to test [Jesus], so that they might have some charge to bring against him.

This is not a real trial.
She's just an object lesson to them.
Her life is nothing more than a test case.

You see, Leviticus in fact, has a law, about executing those caught in adultery. Both men **and** women by the way. Not just women.

But by the 1st Century, no one did that - not even the most orthodox followers of the law.

They couldn't; the Romans forbade it.

So these Scribes and Pharisees are trying to put Jesus between a rock and a hard place. Either he flouts Torah...or Roman law.
It's a lose/lose situation.

It's no wonder, Jesus says, his famous line here:

Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.

He could've just said,

'You know, you're all a bunch of sinners here.'

'You think she's bad – look at yourselves!'

He doesn't though.

Bad jokes about Calvinism aside,

We talked about this in another sermon this month:

Jesus never casts anyone aside, as 'just a bunch of sinners.'

Instead, and this is something new that we get from the Gospel of John today:

Jesus says he came not to condemn the world, but to save the world (the whole world).

I truly believe that Jesus thought his mission was to save our world as a whole. Not just a part. Not just the good people.

What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.

"All people," reports the prologue to the Gospel. Chapter 1

Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved. Chapter 3

Upon meeting him, the first disciples exclaim:

We know that this is truly the Savior of the world. Chapter 4

And this is how Jesus describes himself:

I am the bread of life.

I am the light of the world.

I am the resurrection and the life.

I came not to judge the world but to save the world. Chapter 12

We are all hurting. We all are in need of God's grace and mercy.

People respond to their hurt, by singling out other people. Dividing themselves.

Casting stones.

Throughout the New Testament:

It's always other religious people who do the judging.
 Separating out those who are in vs. those who are out.
 Saints over here; Sinners over there.

Not Jesus.

Jesus's first words are always mercy and grace, not shame and condemnation.

And in the face of the judgement religious people throw at each other, Jesus says this:

*I came not to judge the world but to save the world.
 Let anyone without sin be the first to throw a stone.*

And then to the woman, after the crowd had left:

I do not condemn you.

Notice, that he says all this without any conditions.

This is something that took me a long time to figure out, in my own religious journey. You see, it's not just religious people in the Bible, who like to take the place of judge.

It's religious people all the time.

I was raised Baptist, as many of you know. And in the Baptist church, there's a subtle difference with Presbyterians, in what's required, to fully participate in the life of the church.

To be Baptized, in my Baptist church, you had to make a public profession of faith. You had to get up in front of everyone, usually during the benediction, which is also an alter call. And say, 'I give my life to Jesus. I want to be Baptized.'

And Believers' Baptism, was required, before you could take communion, too.

Now, I did all that, when I was pretty young. 11 or 12 years old.

It's a cherished memory for me, even today.

Don't get me wrong.

But as I grew older, those requirements started to look different.

My Baptist church got more and more theologically conservative.

And as women began to be barred from leadership in its denomination, and LGBT folk cast out from membership, these requirements for full participation in the life of the church, began to take on the character, more and more, of limitations to and fences around the free grace of God, signed and sealed by Baptism and the Lord's Supper.

Spoken and unspoken, there were certain things one had to believe and profess, certain ways one had to look and to be, in order to be acceptable, worthy of grace.

And that stands in contrast to the first words of Jesus to this woman. *I do not condemn you.* He offers grace. Without any condition at all.

Years ago, I heard a sermon from my first Presbyterian pastor, Dave Davis, whom I've quoted from this pulpit many times before.¹ It was a sermon on Jesus feeding the 5,000 with just a couple of loaves and fish. We just read that Scripture here too, not long ago.

So, you might remember, when Jesus looks out at the hungry 5,000, the text from Mark says, *Jesus saw a great crowd, and he had compassion for them.*

In the sermon, Dave pointed out, over and over again, that Jesus has compassion on the crowd, before he knows anything about them at all.

We could say something similar about the woman, here in John, chapter 8.

To echo Rev. Davis's sermon, here and now for our passage:

Let us notice:

That Jesus doesn't ask her to repent, or say the Jesus prayer. He doesn't even ask her what she believes, or if Jesus Christ is her Lord and Savior.

Before he says, I do not condemn you.

He doesn't make an alter call, or ask her to come forward in front of the congregation. He doesn't require her to memorize a catechism or recite her favorite Scripture.

¹ I cannot find the sermon I am alluding to here, but you can find sermons by Dr. Davis here: <https://nassauchurch.org/worship/sermons/>. The sermon that I am echoing follows a similar cadence. Whereas I quote the scripture from John 8, Davis repeats the refrain: 'He didn't....He showed her compassion,' echoing the text from Mark.

Before he says, I do not condemn you.

He doesn't ask about her sexuality, gender identity, or voting history. He doesn't ask her what her views on Caesar are. He gives her no litmus test to see if she was a true, Bible-believing Christian. He doesn't ask her to choose sides in a culture war.

Before he says, I do not condemn you.

He never wonders if she is deserving or worthy. He doesn't inquire to see if she will be like-minded or faithful, afterwards. *He simply says, I do not condemn you.*

Grace, freely and fully given.

Without condition.

Without exception.

And yes, Jesus finishes this episode with the words: from now on do not sin again.

That is a call to discipleship. But before he says those words, and throughout the Gospel too, Jesus consistently leads first with the proclamation of grace: *I do not condemn you.*

It's a difference in emphasis.

In this church, we Baptize children too young to have any conception of who God is, and we share the Table with all who come forward, no matter what creed they ascribe to, even if it's no creed at all. Why? Because we follow a grace freely given without strings attached.

Because Jesus said, *I came not to judge the world but to save the world.*

The world. The whole wide world.

Not just part. Not just the true believers. Certainly not just the worthy and righteous.

The whole wide world.

You know, they've done studies on the effect of astronauts seeing the whole Earth from space. Psychologists have read through hundreds of interviews, surveys, cosmonaut autobiographies.

Social psychologist Adam Grant reports:

Upon returning from space, (upon seeing the whole world from on high) astronauts are less focused on individual achievements and more concerned about the collective good.

Apollo 14 astronaut Edgar Mitchell reports: “You develop an instant global consciousness . . . an intense dissatisfaction with the state of the world, and a compulsion to do something about it. From out there on the moon, international politics looks so petty. You want to grab a politician by the scruff of the neck and drag him a quarter of a million miles out and say, ‘Look at that, you [jerk].’”²

This reaction is known as the overview effect.

The effect of seeing the world. The whole world.

One could say, that we do that here too: Without the benefit of traveling a quarter million miles into space, what we can do, week after week, is return to this place, to read and discern the world that God sees. How God sees us.

In a time when human beings cannot seem to get enough of separating one from another, making judgments, building boundary walls and jail cells, all in the name of religion, nation, citizenship, or law, God sees us differently.

God see us individually, yes, but also as a whole; a whole, hurting world. A people who share a common need of love and grace,

I came not to judge the world but to save the world. He said.

On this Lenten Sunday morning, as our nation, throws rockets and bombs instead of stones. As the world once again plunges headlong into war. As there always seems more money available for war machines than people.

It becomes all the more urgent, for us, the Body of Christ, to gather, to see and proclaim, the world as Christ sees us.

I came to this world not to judge it but to save it. He said.
The world. The whole world. Not just our side.

² Adam Grant, *Think Again: The Power of Knowing What You Don't Know* (New York: Viking, 2021), ch. 6.

You have to wonder, what he was writing. You'll remember, as the religious authorities hauled the woman before him. As they built a stone wall between their holiness and her shame, Jesus wrote in the sand.

I'd like to imagine, that what he drew, was a picture of the earth far in the distance.

I'd like to imagine, as they issued their threats, he saw:

You, and me,
 In all our beauty.
 And all our pain.

I'd like to think: he saw us all together.
And down through the centuries. The whole swarth of humankind:
 yearning for connection,
 hungry for peace,
 in need of grace and mercy.

I'd like to think, he saw that.
And then he said,

Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone.
And: I do not condemn you.
And: Blessed are the Peacemakers.
And: I came to save the world.

Words of grace and mercy.
Let us echo them with our lives. Amen.