

BROADWAY CHRISTIAN CHURCH • COLUMBIA, MISSOURI
THE WORSHIP OF GOD • MARCH 22, 2020
THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT

The Litany
Based on Psalm 32

Happy are those whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sin is covered by grace.

**Happy are those who are free from the burden of iniquity,
in whom there is no deceit.**

When I kept silence, my body wasted away: I groaned inwardly day and night.

My strength seemed dried up as by the heat of summer.

We acknowledge our sin to you, and do not hide. We said:

We will confess our transgressions to the Lord.

God forgives, the old is gone and behold, the new has come!

Song of Focus

Grace

Words and Music by Ed Varnum

**Inspired by “Grace,” written by Frederick Buechner
in *Wishful Thinking***

1. The fragrance of the morning rain, beauty of a rose in bloom;
the haunting melody of song, honeysuckle’s sweet perfume;
each one is grace, I do believe, can’t be earned but just received.
2. A restful sleep throughout the night, cooing of a mourning dove;
the touch of one who truly cares, knowing in your heart you’re loved;
each one is grace, I do believe, can’t be earned but just received.
3. People who are there through good and bad, human love,
ready to serve;
and God’s forgiveness, offered free, love of God that’s undeserved;
each one is grace, I do believe, can’t be earned but just received.

The Scripture 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."

The Message *All Groan Up: Grace* Mark Briley

Synopsis: Can you imagine gathering for worship each Sunday with the main attraction of the service being an opportunity to stone the week's premier sinner from among the congregation? With the cultural draw toward violence, this might be a popular practice - so long as your sins were less than the greatest sinner of the week. Living on that edge might be the adrenaline rush of faith many are seeking. If this passage of John is any indication, Jesus isn't impressed by such a practice. Without grace, true growth of spiritual character is an impossibility.



All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten. Do you remember that simple credo? It came out 34-years ago and hung on the wall of many kindergarten classrooms across America. It came from a book of essays bearing the same title by Robert Fulghum, who happened to be a minister as well. The

book was a *New York Times* bestseller, selling some seven-million copies and, I presume, that many more posters. The subtitle of the book was “*Uncommon Thoughts on Common Things*.”¹ There was something refreshing about the idea that our kindergarten learnings might be the most helpful in our attempts at adulting well. In part, it read like this:

Most of what I really need to know about how to live and what to do and how to be I learned in kindergarten. Wisdom was not at the top of the graduate school mountain, but there in the sand pile at Sunday school. These are the things I learned:

Share everything. Play fair. Don't hit people. Put things back where you found them. Clean up your own mess. Don't take things that aren't yours. Say you're sorry when you hurt somebody. Wash your hands before you eat. Flush. Warm cookies and cold milk are good for you. Live a balanced life - Learn some and think some... And draw and paint and sing and dance... And play and work every day some. Take a nap every afternoon. When you go out into the world, watch out for traffic, hold hands and stick together. Be aware of wonder.

There are longer versions of the original, but you get the idea. The harder and more complicated life becomes, the more I long for the simplicity of these formative concepts. I feel the same way about one of the very first songs I ever learned as a child. “*Jesus loves me this I know for the Bible tells me so. Little ones to him belong. They are weak but he is strong. Yes, Jesus loves me. Yes, Jesus loves me. Yes, Jesus loves me. The Bible tells me so.*” Now I know that theological constructs and the depths of the mysteries of God, manifested in Christ, go far beyond this song but sometimes, and maybe more often than not, this song would be enough for us to navigate the faith.

These two worlds collided for me in one epic elementary school picture that I, with great hesitation, intend to show you this morning. Before I do, remember that we’ve all got at least one photo in our history that depicted an interesting season of attire, hairstyle, smile (or lack thereof) and accessories. Have I braced you enough in advance? Are you ready? Here it is.

¹ <http://www.robertleefulghum.com/>. The poster/poem version is all over the internet and can be found easily by typing in the title to a search engine.



Now let's dissect this for a moment – free therapy for me I suppose. Early elementary – I can't recall the year exactly. Collared shirt – not the worst thing I've ever worn. Hairstyle – bit of a party in the back which I can live with. No smile? Shows I mean business – not a reflection of a sad childhood. And the best of all – perhaps the hardest for you to see – are the two buttons I am wearing on my shirt. I got those two pins from the treasure box at my church for perfect Sunday School attendance. With the tokens received, I selected those two pins and, best I can recall, wore them daily for some period of time.

Carrie remembers me wearing them on our first date so we're talking a few years I suppose. The first pin says, "*Jesus loves me.*" The second says, "*I love Jesus.*" Perhaps I knew nothing about

fashion, and perhaps my mother was letting me rock my own flair as I saw fit, and perhaps the mullet that was brewing atop my head wasn't in the best taste but *this I know... this I know... Jesus loves me... this I know.* And by kindergarten – my faith education and secular education had prepped me for most all I would ever need to know. Let's release that photo, now shall we?

This is all well and good and a bit fun, but I know you're watching here today having been through some things and you're thinking, "*This isn't enough.*" Beyond the communal trials we're going through right now, you were already in the midst of something terribly difficult... and that just doesn't go away because you're quarantined. It may be so heavy on your heart even in this very moment that the pain of it all can't even be cracked by a goofy childhood picture of your minister. I get that. And some of us may be so uptight about our ideologies and theological arguments and need for black and white lines of debate that "*Jesus loves me, this I know...*" is not satisfactory enough and well... just let that churn in your spirit a bit, would you?

Even as we're journeying into new territory of the liturgical season history will call 'quarantined time,' we've decided (*at this point*) to press on with our Lenten series, "All Groan Up." There's obviously a little play on words here. Hearing the words, we think about growing up – "Well aren't you all grown up!" we say to kids we haven't seen in a while. Just imagine – you'll see some of our kids post-quarantine who will be five-inches taller and have handlebar mustaches. Who knows? The groaning (g.r.o.a.n.i.n.g) up part has to do with the ache of growth. The growing pains if you will. We all get that when it comes to growing older – our bodies ache differently than they once did and hair sprouts up in places we didn't know it could. The spirit matures in a similar way – there is some angst involved... some pain... some great joy and satisfaction, however, when we can embrace the maturing process – accepting as beautiful the wrinkles and additional spots and hair that sprout from our souls. Our new world reality is testing our groaning and our growing more than ever.

Today's passage of focus remains in John's Gospel – we're hanging with John the entire Lenten season. This word from John 8 is a curious one – one of the most beloved Gospel stories and yet one that we struggle to find in what scholars agree to be the most authoritative and earliest manuscripts. Lots of speculation as to why. Regardless, many scholars believe, due to the findings in some writings found as early as 100 A.D., that this is without great question a real story about Jesus. So why is it missing from many of those early manuscripts? One thought is that the act of Jesus was so gracious that for a long time, people were afraid to tell it.

You heard it read this morning. It is a provocative story, isn't it? It's written well, like an episode of "This is Us."² You think you're watching a television show, and all of the sudden you realize, "Wait. This is about me." Good writing always does that.

The scene is set well. Jesus is teaching at the temple again. He's kind of a big deal by now. Being so always means some love him and some hate him. If he was teaching from the front steps of our church this morning, there would undoubtedly be some religious folks holding protest signs – "Repent or burn in hell – this guy is blasphemous." This moment would really get them fired up. The scholars and Pharisees fell into, if not purposely framed, another opportunity to catch Jesus on a technicality of the law and either discredit him completely or, better yet, get him arrested.

They toss a woman at the foot of the stairs where Jesus is teaching. "Teacher," they say, "We caught her red-handed. She was in the very act of committing adultery." Well that's just awkward. This may be reason enough to think they set this woman up – how else do they stumble upon this act, and why isn't the adulterous man brought to Jesus, too? The same law they were employing to get this woman stoned applied even more harshly to the man. In fact, the Jewish codified law, known as the

² <http://www.nbc.com/this-is-us?nbc=1>

Mishnah, says a man caught in the act was to be strangled to death. If that's not enough, it denotes how the strangulation is to be carried out exactly. I'll spare you the details but it's pretty gruesome. Who sits around in that meeting and comes up with this stuff? Anyway – no man. Just another nameless woman tossed as bait to hook Jesus. She is just a tool. A thing. The minute people become things, the spirit of Christianity is dead. Names matter. Just open and read page one of the New Testament and you'll see what I mean.

The law was serious about this stuff, and adultery was one of the big three no-no's: idolatry, murder, and adultery. Many rabbi's taught that every Jew should prefer death over committing any of these offenses. And here's the dilemma before Jesus. If he says, "*Yep. You're right. Stone her,*" then he loses the name he has built as a person of love and mercy and never again would he be called a friend of sinners – which was his calling card by this point. Secondly, a decision to stone her would place him at a collision point with the Roman law, as the Jewish people had no power to pass or carry out the death sentence on anyone. On the flip side, if he said that the woman should be pardoned, it could be immediately and accurately said, "*He's breaking the law of Moses and in fact teaching that it should be broken.*" Some would even add to the rumors, growing this to say, "*Jesus not only condones but encourages people to commit adultery.*" Some people really love putting others in this position as a way of discrediting them; their kindness, their sense of mercy.

Jesus immediately hits the dirt. This is one of my favorite parts of all. What is he doing in the dirt? And what is the woman doing? And what about the crowd – were there kids in the crowd watching closely? Did he make eye contact with one of them as he knelt to the ground? I don't know but there he is. Some suggest he was buying time. Don't rush a decision – never a bad idea. Some versions suggest Jesus acted like he didn't hear them as if to force them to repeat their sadistic staging and trust their own appalling conviction of their own actions to resolve the matter. One of the most fascinating ideas comes from some study of the original Greek. The Greek word "*to write*" is *graphein*; but in this passage the word used is *katagraphhein*, which can mean "*to write down a record against someone.*" The Armenian translation of this passage even says, "*Jesus, bowing his head, was writing with his finger on the earth to declare their sins; and they were seeing their own sins written in the dirt.*"³ How about that? You throw someone else and their issues under the bus only for your own sins and issues to be written in the dirt before the crowd.

I imagine this incredible silence, but the text says the religious people/the church board/the ordained folks/the denominational review people ... kept badgering him. I can almost see Jesus move his eyes from the dirt, to the eyes of a child before him,

³ Exegetical support for this passage comes from William Barclay's commentary on The Gospel of John. The Westminster Press. 1975.

over to the woman accused, on up to the eyes of the accusers as he rises. Point of decision.

I honestly wonder what they all thought he would say – if some were playing odds against which way he might actually go. He puts his finger over his lips so as to hush the crowd. Then he says, “*Stone her.*” Crowd erupts. “*Wait. Wait.*” he says. “*The one without sin throws the first stone.*”

Then, Jesus makes, in my mind, the same eye-contact in reverse order as he finds his finger back to the dirt to doodle some more. Talk about March Madness! Jesus has just delivered a killer move – but he does so at great risk, right? The woman is surely convinced she’s a goner. Some of the Pharisees were surely arrogant and hot-headed enough to think they were sinless: “*Give me the rock. Let’s do this.*” Jesus could have said, “*Stone me instead.*” But he doesn’t. Fascinating. But it’s the elders, some say specifically the oldest among them, that walk away first – and everyone else followed suit until finally, only Jesus and the woman remain. Who knows how long this departing process took? But Jesus practiced so well the art of revolutionary patience. And Lord, am I grateful. That Jesus might be so patient with even me. He could look at our lives and yell or demand or harp or scold or bring the rod; and yet he waits, he loves, he graces us with grace.

Jesus has tilled the whole ground by this point with his finger. He connects with the woman: “*Well, nobody left to condemn you, eh?*” “*No one, sir.*” “*Neither do I.*” Now this part really gets to the rule keepers. Shouldn’t she make penance? Maybe some “*Hail Mary’s*” or at least community service?

It’s the same struggle of the older brother of the Prodigal Son. Do you know the story? It’s pre-COVID-19 days. Older brother stays home. Works the family business. Takes care of his folks. Younger brother says, “*You’re dead to me, dad,*” and moves to Seattle to start a punk band. Years later... all these years... older bro faithful to home, younger bro makes a mess of his life. So much so that he’s willing to come home and be a slave to his dad. He flies home – dad gets wind that his boy is coming home and he jumps in his Dodge Stratus and books it to the Columbia Regional Airport to embrace his son. He rents the Country Club and hosts a “*He’s back!*” party. And the older brother is ticked. The father has the gall to say to his pouting elder son, “*All I have is already yours. Your brother was a wreck, and I thought I’d never hug his neck again – and now he’s home, and we’re having a party. Won’t you come?*” Nope. He won’t... at least we never hear if he did.

I hope he did. I hope he showed up and he and his brother sang karaoke at the party – their favorite song from middle school and laughed and hugged and loved the space. Any time I preach that story, someone comes to me in disbelief. “*We can’t all deserve the same welcome*” – is always the gist. “*I’ve worked too hard for someone*

else to get the same thing when they've done so little." That's always some version of the sentiment.

And I'll get an anonymous letter from someone about this story, too. And in all **CAPS**, it will say, "*but Jesus said, 'GO AND SIN NO MORE.'*" I know. I know. I'm trying really hard to go and sin no more myself. Super hard. I'm trying. And I wonder if the woman was thrown at his feet again, a year down the road, if he'd look her in the eye and say, "*I said, NO MORE,*" and then throw the first stone to send her to her eternal death. What do you think?

I know it's complicated. And there are natural consequences, relationally and otherwise, because of the choices we make. We're all just working out our salvation, our faith freedom, a day at a time. I'm trying to be the best version of myself from moment to moment. I imagine when that woman left that scene, she was thinking the same thing. I don't know what transpired after that for her. I hope she sinned no more. I'm sure she tried. I know it's a scandalous slippery slope to leave any wiggle room for mistakes, which is probably why this story was left out of many early manuscripts.

This woman surely stood before her Maker when it was her time just like we will. And I wonder what she said then. Maybe she didn't say anything. Maybe she simply sang, "*Jesus loves me, this I know...*" this. I. know. "*Yes, Jesus loves me. Yes, Jesus loves me. Yes, Jesus loves me.*" His grace showed me so. I know that's too simple. Too departed from the real world. But this I know. Jesus loves you... and me. And sometimes, like these days we're living through, when the chaos around us leaves us uncertain of many, many things – Jesus loves us? Sometimes -- that's all I really need to know.