

SOUTHPORT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Rev. Jim Capps

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**“FOLLOWING JESUS’ EXAMPLE”**

**John 8:1-11**

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Don’t you hate it when you talk about forgiveness and then find yourself in an unanticipated situation where you know you are being called upon to take the first step? That happened to me last Sunday. I preached on the subject of “The Blessing of Forgiveness,” and then found myself at a Presbytery Pastor’s Retreat with a person who had really upset me at a Presbytery Meeting. What made the situation even worse was that my emotions had spilled over in another meeting when I had come on strong with him.

I found myself behind him in the breakfast line. Before I knew it, led by the Holy Spirit, I was soon asking for his forgiveness. Before I could finish, he was apologizing to me. We sat next to each other at a meal and had the opportunity to find out about each other’s background and found we had a lot in common. That whole incident made me much more open to what God wanted to say to me on the retreat which was enjoyable and helpful.

The issue which had caused the friction between this fellow pastor and me was one that has caused lots of dissension over the past 30 years in the Presbyterian Church, USA. I’m always thinking in “We-They” terms every time I’m with PCUSA pastors. While the surface issue has to do with the ordination of gay and lesbian persons, the deeper issue really is the authority of the Bible. Is the Bible really a handbook for the living of our lives? Is it to be taken seriously?

This question about the authority of the Bible in our lives goes far past homosexual ordination. It reaches into all of life dealing with issues of morality, justice, individual and corporate integrity. It speaks to us about the hot issues of abortion, sexual promiscuity, materialism, corporate and political corruption, and the list goes on and on.

In June of 2006, the General Assembly of the PCUSA in its biennial meeting passed the recommendations from the Theological Task force on Peace, Unity, and Purity. For many of us, the place of the Bible in making the key decisions of our lives was the main issue of the actions taken by the General Assembly.

Each of the 173 Presbyteries and each of our 11,000 churches was given the possibility to “scruple” some of the ideas of the Bible as being “non-essential.” While the Book of Order still has an amendment saying that marriage is between a man and a woman and that we are called to live a life of fidelity as a married person and chastity as a single person, it too could be scrupled.

Many churches, like ours, who believe strongly in the authority of the Bible in every area of our lives, have had to evaluate whether or not we continue to function in a denomination that could allow the ordination of gay and lesbian persons. While none have been ordained as far as we know, the possibility is there.

As we wrestle with the dilemma of what we, SPC, should do, I believe we must go scurrying to the Bible for wisdom and discernment. As we page through the Gospels, we can ask ourselves, “What Would Jesus Do?” More than just asking the question, we must follow Jesus’ example and do what Jesus did.

Please follow along with me as I read an insightful situation in the life of Jesus found in John 8:1-11. Try to see yourself in this situation in the Temple during the Feast of the Tabernacles in the fall of the year. Where are you in the picture of the story of the woman caught in adultery being brought to Jesus in order to trap Him?

### **WHERE ARE YOU IN THIS PASSAGE?**

Do you see yourself there next to Jesus? This is where I started as I asked the question “What would Jesus do with our denomination?” I “went to school” on His words and actions as found in this very provocative vignette in the life and ministry of Jesus.

Even though the religious leaders are looking for ways to take Jesus’ life in the preceding chapter, after a quiet evening on the Mount of Olives, early in the morning, He is in the temple courts teaching. While there is strong opposition, He is still able to do effective ministry to glorify His Father who sent Him.

Jesus does not shrink from conflict with the religious institution of His day. No, instead, He continues to do His ministry with integrity and intensity in their midst. He does not do a benefit and loss analysis on his ministry at this point. He knows that His ultimate end will be death. Jesus stands boldly and courageously in the midst of the religious institution of His day.

The religious leaders have probably set up a woman to be caught in adultery so that they could trap Jesus. In a crude, terribly insensitive manner, they drag her in to the temple and place her before Jesus. Please note, the man with whom she was caught, is not seen here. It’s just the half-clothed, sobbing, horribly embarrassed woman.

Hoping to set the trap, the teachers of the law and the Pharisees ask Jesus the question, “Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. In the Law, Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?”

They think they finally have Jesus where they want Him. If He says “Stone her,” then He will stand in conflict with the Romans who don’t allow the Jews to execute their criminals. Plus, Jesus would lose much of the approval of the people who were resonating with His teachings about love and kindness.

If Jesus answered that she should not be stoned then He would be in direct violation of the Law found in both Leviticus and Deuteronomy which called for stoning both the man and the woman. In their minds, the religious leaders felt that they had Jesus right where they wanted Him. With hundreds of witnesses observing the horribly indelicate scene, which ever answer He gave, Jesus would be condemned.

As I stand next to Jesus, I see Him bend down and start writing on the ground. He is incensed at the blatant cruelty and shamelessness of the religious leaders. He has great compassion for the embarrassed, sobbing woman. He collects His thoughts as He begins writing there in the dirt of the courtyard. While we don’t know exactly what He was writing, I see Him writing the sins of her accusers.

Finally after a few moments, with the religious leaders continuing to pressure Him, Jesus stands and with passion, yet restraint looks them straight in the eyes and says, “If any one of you is without sin, (maybe pointing to the words He has written on the ground) let him be the first to throw a stone at her.” He then continues to stoop down and write on the ground.

What happens next is stunning. There is a silence as one by one, from the oldest to the youngest, the religious leaders drop their stones and walk away. Once again, Jesus has foiled their attempts at trapping Him.

The watching crowd is silent as Jesus tenderly says to the incredulous woman still standing in shame, “Woman, where are your accusers? Has no one condemned you?”

“No one, sir,” she quietly answers.

“Then neither do I condemn you. Go now and leave your life of sin.” Jesus responds. As I hear those words from Him, I remember John 3:17, when Jesus says, “For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.”

The woman did not need to be condemned. She was already condemned by her actions. While not condoning her behavior, she needed to repent and then given a second chance. Repentance means leaving behind our lives of sin and walking in God’s ways.

Yes, I see myself along side of Jesus, wanting to be like Him in all the words and actions of my life.

Do you see yourself with the religious leaders?

I must admit, since I was looking primarily at Jesus when I began thinking and praying about this passage as it relates to our relationship with our denomination, I must tell you I was not pleased when I also saw myself in the midst of the religious leaders.

In the past 30 years, at times I have been in leadership positions fighting against the ordination of gay and lesbian persons. Deeply entrenched in my understanding of the Bible and what it says on the subject, I have been willing to use words, methods and strategies that have not been Biblical or Christ-like to try to make my point and win the day.

For example, after my emotions spilled over with the fellow pastor I mentioned earlier, he wrote me a letter and said that he wished I had taken seriously the passage in Matthew 18 which says if you have something against your brother, you should go and talk with him about it. In my self-righteous indignation, I was offended by his letter. Who did he think he was telling me what the Bible had to say?

Do you see my point, like the religious leaders, I was willing to overlook parts of the Bible to guard the parts about which I felt most passionately. In essence, I have had stones in hand, not throwing them at the woman, but at the other religious leaders.

As I see myself in the story, I am dropping my stone walking away with the rest of them. For me, it means repentance and asking for God to help me to serve Him with a holy integrity.

Do you see yourself in the shameful woman?

As I prayerfully spent time with this passage, I saw myself also being like her. While my sins may not be the same as hers, I realize how far short I fall to God’s expectations for us. I realize how hypercritical and hyper-critical I can become.

Frankly, if it weren’t for my faith in Jesus Christ, who died that I might be forgiven and who has given me lots of second chances, I would stand condemned worthy of being stoned.

As I stand with her, I hear Jesus say to me, “Man, where are they? Has no one condemned you?”

With great relief I answer, “No one, sir.”

Jesus responds, “Then neither do I condemn you. Go now and leave your life of sin.” As I repent, turning from my waywardness and moving toward His way, I feel the blessed relief of forgiveness.

Do you see yourself with the woman?

## **HOW DOES THIS APPLY TO US?**

I believe that God is calling us to follow Jesus' example. In the Denominational Response Team's and the Session's unanimous votes to stay in the PCUSA and be a bold voice for Biblical Authority as we understand it, I believe we are following the example of Jesus. Even though He wasn't combative about it Jesus did not go off and become a part of another group of people who saw things His way. He continually presented a compelling case for the Kingdom of God in every way possible so that people far from God might come into a living, growing relationship with God.

I like these words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German theologian and pastor who felt strongly that He had to stand against the evil regime of the Nazis:

“Jesus Christ lived in the midst of his enemies. At the end all his disciples deserted him. On the cross he was utterly alone, surrounded by evildoers and mockers. For this cause he had come, to bring peace to the enemies of God. So the Christian, too, belongs not in the seclusion of a cloistered life, but in the thick of the foes.”

While I certainly would not compare those who have disagreed with us over the past 30 years to the Nazis nor do I want to address them as enemies, if we follow the example of Jesus, we must not leave to be with people with whom we feel comfortable. We must remain and make our convictions known.

The recommendations approved by the Session call for us to be involved in the PCUSA in a way that we haven't been in the past. While I am not going to read them here now, you can find the 11 recommendations made by the DRT and approved by the Session in the report sent to most of you in the mail and available at the Welcome Center as well as the Deacon's Desk. In every opportunity afforded us, we will share what we believe to be Biblical truth as we understand it. By God's grace and the power of the Holy Spirit, we will speak boldly.

Like Jesus, as He tenderly cared for the embarrassed woman in today's passage, we must be about the business of helping hurting people, sometimes far from God, to find forgiveness and a second chance. We must make the Great Commission our primary mission. It is our prayer that we will be a catalyst for the PCUSA to do likewise.

Our reason for staying in the PCUSA must not be an analysis of the benefits of leaving or staying. That wasn't Jesus' approach and it can't be ours. Our reason for staying must always be out of obedience to the God who loved us enough to come to our world and die for us. In faithfulness to this Great and Awesome God, we must follow the example of Jesus.

The decision to stay was not based upon losing or keeping property. In both the Denominational Response Team meetings and the Session meeting last Tuesday evening, property was hardly discussed. More than buildings, property and programs, we perceived that God was calling us to stay and be faithful right here where we are.

We know that some of you will not agree with the report of the DRT and the action of the Session to stay in the PCUSA. We deeply care about your feelings and want to be available to listen to your concerns and try to answer your questions. There will be open forums this afternoon at 2:00 and on Tuesday evening at 7:00, both in the Chapel.

In addition, you are invited to share your thoughts and questions with the members of the DRT, the Session, or the pastors. All four pastors would be happy to get

together with you and care for and pray with you at a time and place that is convenient with you.

We desperately want to keep the unity of the Body of Christ here at SPC even though there may be differences of opinion about staying in the PCUSA. Together, we want to move on from this place ready to focus on the exciting ministry God has given us to accomplish in this season of our history.

I want to thank those of you who have prayed for discernment on this issue. We believe wholeheartedly that God has answered our prayers in an unmistakable way.

At this time I want to ask members of the Session and DRT who are present at this service to come and stand next to me as we give thanks for the guidance God has given us, the unity of both the DRT and the Session and to pray for each of you, our church, our denomination, and our faithfulness to God in the future.