

Suttons Bay Congregational Church  
John 8:1-11 And Lead Us Not Into Temptation . . .

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1But Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. 2At dawn he appeared again in the temple courts, where all the people gathered around him, and he sat down to teach them. 3The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group 4and said to Jesus, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. 5In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" 6They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him.

But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. 7When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her." 8Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground.

9At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. 10Jesus straightened up and asked her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?"

11"No one, sir," she said.

"Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin."

I know that some of you are miffed right now. Not only did you brave the elements to get here this morning but then you sat down and read your bulletin and thought there was a mistake—you thought the time for greeting had inadvertently been left out, a little sin of omission. But then you read further down the page and discovered that there was to be a Passing of the Peace. And groaning inwardly you said to yourself, "A peace of what? If it was a piece of chocolate—well now, that would be fine. But this passing of the peace thing—it's so, well, I don't know, liturgical. It reminds me of Catholic or Lutheran services which are fine and good but we're not Catholics or Lutherans, we're Congregationalists and Congregationalists do NOT pass the peace. We're warm and friendly and so we greet, not pass." But alas, today, no matter how warm and friendly we are, there is no time of greeting—only a time for passing.

I grew up in a church that passed the peace and truth be told, I hated it. It always felt forced and awkward. Some people said "hello" others said "peace" still others tried to start a short conversation, "So Robin, how's school?" This awkwardness was compounded by the touching aspect of the whole thing. I do not come from a touchy feely family. We weren't huggers or snugglers. When my dad walked by and tousled my hair, it was an act of great affection and affirmation. And that was just fine with me. It was his way and I knew that. And my mom always told me that she loved me—I didn't need a hug to make it so. And so with this training up in the ways of limited physical contact, you can imagine that the hand-shaking, and sometimes hugging, and God-forbid in extreme cases even kissing aspects of the Passing of the Peace, well now it just sent me over the edge. I dreaded it.

This feeling of dread about the Passing of the Peace continued throughout college and into seminary. By that time I was a young adult who had gotten used to, and even enjoyed, shaking hands and hugging and sometimes even kissing. But I still didn't like the Passing of the Peace. But that all changed when I attended an Ash Wednesday Service in the seminary chapel. That service transformed me. During worship our church history professor led us in a unison Prayer of Confession, then he spoke a meaningful Assurance of Pardon, reminding us that God forgives us and loves us no matter what it was we had done or left undone, and then he invited us to pass the peace. And as a light bulb of understanding went on in my head, my heart opened under the gentle pressure of the rains of God's grace—grace as I heard it spoken to me in the voices of my seminary friends with whom I was crowded hip to hip between the cold wooden pews of the seminary chapel. Peace be with you. Peace be with you. Peace be with you. Passing the peace wasn't a fancy church way of saying hello. Passing the peace was sharing the peace of Christ with each other—a bunch of seminarians admitting that we had screwed up, done less than our best, and let other people down. And there was God—forgiving us and assuring us that our relationship with God was still in tact.

And there we were with each other—celebrating that grace—putting each other’s minds at ease, reminding each other that we could be at peace because God had forgiven us. In the moment of Passing the Peace, we were Christ to each other. Jesus said, “Peace I leave with you my friends, I give to you so that you may give to others too.” And there we were, sharing that peace with one another.

It is that same peace, the peace of Christ, that we shared earlier. And it is the same peace that Jesus shared with today’s naughty girl from the Bible—we don’t know her name—she’s only known to us as the woman caught in adultery—a woman who did not resist temptation. Her story is a painful one, a story that isn’t even really about her, rather, it’s about the religious leaders who just use her as a pawn to try and make their point against Jesus.

At the time, Jesus drew crowds every time he taught; on this occasion he was at the temple gate on the Mount Olives, just outside of Jerusalem. Members of the local clergy group—the Pharisees and the scribes—were threatened by Jesus’ growing popularity. He wasn’t one of them—he hadn’t gone through the proper channels or been approved by the temple’s governing body. To them he was an upstart, a wild card, a lone ranger who wasn’t willing to play by the rules, the rules that it was their responsibility to enforce. We often paint the Pharisees in a negative light and yet they were just doing what they were supposed to be doing—keeping Jewish law and making sure that others did too.

And so on that day, they wanted to put this young Jesus in his place. They wanted to catch him in a contradiction and so discredit him in front of the crowds. I imagine that the Pharisees weren’t sure exactly how they would go about this. But, as luck would have it, on their way to the temple that day, they saw the young woman whose reputation had been destroyed when it came out that she had slept with a man who wasn’t her husband. I imagine that they would normally have been merciful and tried to overlook the offense, but on this day she was a handy pawn in their scheme to entrap Jesus and so they ordered her to follow them. In fact, they grabbed her by the arms and nearly dragged her as they rushed in broad strides to the temple gate—a place she had avoided because of her sin. But here they were manhandling her and forcing her, not just in front of a crowd of people who knew full well just what kind of a woman she was, but forcing her also in front of this man called Jesus, a man who had the power to heal and who many even said was the Messiah. Tears streamed from her eyes and she tried to hide her face behind her veil—for months she’d tried so hard to avoid people’s stares and condemning words—she mostly just stayed at home. But now here she was in front of hundreds, saturated with shame and shaking with fear for her life as a religious authority pushed her in front of the infamous teacher and asked with not a little sarcasm in their voices "Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. 5In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" She was so confused when at first this Jesus didn’t reply; instead he just started writing something in the sand at his feet. But the men whose hands were like bands of steel on her arms kept questioning him and making their accusations against her. She was sobbing and gasping for what could be her last breaths. And Jesus finally spoke. "If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her." At these words she bowed her head and braced herself in preparation for the painful impact of the first stone. A few moments passed and she felt nothing until the man on her right released his painful grip on her arm. Then the man on her left followed suit. When she looked up her eyes stung with a puff of dust—dust left behind as one by one her accusers walked away. Indeed, there was soon to be a cloud of dust as each person who heard the words of Jesus left, heads hanging, recognizing their own sin, and knowing there was no way they could cast the first stone. Soon it was just the woman and Jesus, alone at the temple gate. I imagine that he walked over to her and placed his gentle hands on the burning spots of her upper arms where her accusers had grabbed and bruised her. And as she felt his healing touch he asked, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" And looking around at the empty temple gate she realized that they hadn’t—they hadn’t condemned her. Not a single stone had been cast. And clearing her throat she responded, "No one, sir". And she was shocked when he said, "Then neither do I condemn you." And drawing away those healing hands from her arms he said, "Go now and leave your life of sin."

That is the peace of Christ. And may it be with you and with you and with you and with all of us.