

“Wandering into a Trap”

John 7:53-8:11

Series: Grace Week 2. Grace Takes Our Place

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It begins so innocently - with just a look. Her eyes sweep across the crowded market and, for the briefest instance, catches his gaze. She sends a smile. He returns it. She looks down and begins to move on through the jostling crowds. While hunting for vegetables at a stall on the next street, she sees him again. It fills her with a warmth she's not felt in quite some time. He is handsome. Gathering her beans and spices, she turns a corner down another narrow lane - and runs into him. He quickly bends to pick up the items she drops. "Forgive me," he begins. "Here are your things." His hand touches hers. "Thank you," she whispers, clasping her purchases and making a quick escape for home where her husband waits for his supper.

She waves it off as nothing. But each day, at the market, she notices him. And if the truth be told, she hopes he'll be there. A shiver of excitement, a thrill glows within. She's disappointed if he doesn't show. With each encounter, a little more unfolds. At first it's just a few words. Then they exchange names. Their conversations become longer. They meet at the same stall each day and walk a bit. A friendship develops. He fills her soul with a lightness she's not known in years. Her husband is not abusive or cruel, just indifferent and distracted. Whatever passion she once felt for him was extinguished long ago. Now, after such a long dry spell, here is a man who listens to her, encourages her, makes her feel precious and loved. She begins to confide in him. She trusts him. Their rendezvous became more frequent, more lengthy, more secret.

Through the drudgery of her day, she catches herself thinking about him. She plans what to wear, what to say, what to bring him. Inside, she knows it is wrong. But desire soothes away those warnings. "It's all harmless," whispers the inner voice, "He's just a kind friend, a companion to drive away the boredom."

And one day, while her defenses are down, they become more than friends. In the aftermath, waves of shock and shame wash over her. He calms her and says it won't happen again. But it does. And with each encounter, the shock softens and the shame becomes silent, drowned out by delirious euphoria. He cares for her, understands her, stands by her. She longs for him. She wants to belong to him. She no longer worries about her wandering ... nor that she is wandering into a trap.

The first rays of sunlight filter through the curtains. Suddenly a tempest of confusion bursts through the door. Three strangers surround the bed shouting: "Adultery!" "Sinners!" "Get up! You're coming with us!" A robe is thrown over her while they twist her arm and push her into the daylight. Stumbling and scared, she notices a crowd beginning to swarm. They shout horrid names at her. She is the eye of a

hurricane moving toward the Temple. Abruptly the crowd disrupts a larger audience quietly listening to a teacher. Rough hands push her into the center of the assembly.

A hush breaks over the people. She stands alone – every eye fixed on this solitary sinner. Then she realizes she is truly alone. Where is her lover? What happened to the one who cares for her, understands her, stands by her? Did he escape? Did he betray her? Was he part of this trap? She struggles to cover herself. Exposed, ashamed and terrified, she knows what this is: a trial. A Pharisee in a flowing white robe stands and pronounces the accusation: “Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of adultery. In the Law, Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?” (John 8:4-5)

For the first time, she looks down at her Judge. Sitting on the pavement in a simple homespun robe, He does not look like one of the high and mighty guardians of religious morals. In fact, she hears scorn in the Pharisee’s voice. Perhaps they are trying to trap Him and she is merely the bait. Yet He isn’t taking the bait. He ignores them and quietly traces His finger in the dust. Throughout the mob, bystanders reach down and pick up stones and rocks. The Pharisee asks more insistently: “Teacher, what is your verdict? Should we obey the Law of Moses and stone her for this sin?” It is a clever trap. If He says, “The Law is the Law – stone her,” Roman soldiers will arrest Him for carrying out capital punishment – a sentence only they can execute. If He is too lenient, they will accuse Him of blaspheming God’s Law. There is no way out of this trap.

For a moment, take a place in the crowd. I know, you’d never be in a lynch mob. You’d ask to be dismissed from this jury. You might even be the courageous lone defender to stand up for her. I don’t doubt it. Yet each of us possesses the ability to categorize and condemn others. And while you might not hold a stone in your hand, your heart may be stone cold toward *those* people.

All it takes is a label. It’s so easy for my mind to slap a self-adhesive name on those I don’t like, those who don’t like me, look like me, act like me, think like me, believe like me. Maybe that’s why Jesus not only said, “Do not judge” (Matthew 7:1) but also

You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, ‘Raca,’ is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell. (Matthew 5:21-22)

Whether its murder, war, or character assassination, what begins in the mind comes out as a label, an insult, a slur. It has to. Before I can steal, kill or destroy you I have to take away your humanity. I have to make you less than human: a them, an object, an it. Labels allow me to do this. Maybe I’ve been binging too much on the Twilight Zone, but I wonder what it would be like if every time I judge a person in my head, a label suddenly appeared on him or her. I can make snap judgments faster than you can snap chat. And I

don't think I'm alone in this. In fact if you look down on me for this, you just made a judgment.

If you want to catch your condemnation in action, try to observe how you compare and compete with others at home, school, work, church or in the community. We're often unaware how we measure ourselves against one another. In 1921, a German psychologist noticed chickens form into a hierarchy. Each hen knows which hens are above and which are below. From his study he coined a term: "pecking order." We humans compare ourselves to one another in terms of income, possessions, intelligence, beauty, size, accomplishments, and strength. We use these comparisons to determine our position in the pecking order. We feel superior to some, inferior to others, intimidated by some and critical of others, better than some, worse than others.

This starts young. I recall giving my daughter and her junior high friends a ride home from a party. Somehow they think the driver can't hear them. One phrase I heard repeatedly was, "Well not to be mean or anything but..." and then they would criticize another student. Apparently, if they say this magic formula first, they have permission to be as mean as they want. God did not make us to be mean. God does not give us the right to look down and condemn others. God does not want us to throw stones.

The disheveled, ill-clad woman stands in the center of their withering condemnation. She knows she only has a few breaths, a few heartbeats left. In their eyes, her fate is sealed. No matter what the Teacher says, in the minds of the mob she is already tried, condemned and executed. They will find a way to deal with her. Who trapped her? Her husband, her lover, the Pharisees? Did this new Teacher have a hand in it? She hates them all. Why is He just stooping and doodling in the ground? Say something! Don't you realize my life is in your hands? You are the only hope I have!

Stand for a minute in the center of the circle. You are the woman: exposed, guilty, defenseless, scared. Each of us has done or said or thought things we would not want dragged into the harsh light of public shame. We work hard to hide our worst side. Even our thoughts lead us to places we're ashamed to admit. For just as anger starts in the depths of the heart, so does lust. Jesus says in the same Sermon on the Mount

You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. (Matthew 5:27-28)

Infidelity is not limited to marriage. Scripture often speaks of "spiritual adultery." Whenever the people of Israel worshiped other gods and idols, God called that idolatry adultery (see the book of Hosea). Anytime we allow some earthy person, place or thing to take first place in our affections, to displace God, then we commit spiritual adultery. We have wandered for our first love, the Lord.

Lust lies. Desire deceives. It does not matter if it is lust for pornography, lust for a person, lust for a substance, lust for power, possessions or position. It always lies and tells you life will be better if you just had him, her or it. Desire deceives you into thinking there are no consequences for your actions.

Or maybe, despite your attempts to wipe the slate clean and make a fresh start, you still feel guilty, ashamed or condemned. Ostracized by the in-crowd. Criticized by inner voices. Unjustly treated. Unfairly used and abused. Unable to escape the gaze and gape of those who dismiss you or look down on you. You've wandered into a trap.

What happens next? Grace happens.

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Without warning, the man writing in the dirt stands up, calmly brushes the dust from His hands, and pronounces His sentence. "Go ahead and stone her..." They lift the stones. She covers her head in futile self-defense. "...If," the Teacher continues, "you are without sin." Then He sits back down to draw in the dirt. The mob freezes and becomes quiet as the grave. She crouches with eyes tightly closed awaiting the terrifying end.

But she never feels the bombardment of those stones. Instead, another strange noise fills the Temple. One by one, rocks drop to the ground. With a single sentence, the Teacher turns the tables and put the vigilantes on trial. He uses their own consciences to convict them. Like a summer storm, the once raging mob disperses. When finally she gains the courage to open her eyes, she finds herself alone with the Teacher. Again, He stands, wipes the dirt from His hands and quietly asks her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" She quickly looks about. They are all gone. Incredulous, she replies, "No one sir." Yet her trial is not over. There is still one in the Temple that day who is without sin, who has the right to condemn her for this sin. And that Judge is now ready to pass sentence. "Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declares. "Go now and leave your life of sin" (John 8:11).

His words startle her. He does not condemn her. Nor does He condone her sin. She can't blame her husband, lover or the mob. No matter what they did, she still broke her vows. In His grace, Jesus sets aside her punishment. Yet He does not set her free from the need to change. She looked for a man who cares for her, understands her and stands by her. Finally, here is a Man who does not lie to her, trick her or trap her. He takes nothing from her. Instead He tells her the truth and gives her love – true love – the love she'd been waiting for her whole life. Her life is truly in His hands. He is her only hope.

Grace doesn't set traps. It sets you free – free from the judgment of others, free from the need to judge others. Grace doesn't condemn or condone. It creates change. Grace doesn't stand in judgment over us, it stoops to take our place on the Cross. Grace doesn't throw stones, it rolls the stone away. Grace doesn't call you names. It calls your name and shows you the way out. And then it asks you to drop the stone and offer Grace to others.

This is the truth you and I need to hear.
This is the love we've been waiting for.
We have fallen into His hands – hands that are pierced by our sin.
He is our only hope.
Don't wander.
Follow Him.