

The Gift of Acceptance

John 8: 1-11

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The story is told that when Huber Humphrey, the 38th Vice President of the United States, died in 1978 hundreds of people from across the world attended his funeral. All were welcome, but one – former President Richard Nixon, who had not long previously dragged himself and his country through the humiliation and shame of Watergate. As eyes turned away and conversations ran dry around him Nixon could feel the ostracism being ladled out to him.

Then Jimmy Carter, the serving US President, walked into the room. Carter was from a different political party than Nixon and well known for his honesty and integrity. As he moved to his seat President Carter noticed Richard Nixon standing all alone. Carter immediately changed course, walked over to Richard Nixon, held out his hand, and smiling genuinely and broadly embraced Nixon and said “Welcome home, Mr President! Welcome home!”

The incident was reported by Newsweek magazine, which wrote: “If there was a turning point in Nixon’s long ordeal in the wilderness, it was that moment and that gesture of love and compassion.” (Source: Reported in Maxie Dunnam, *The Workbook on Living as a Christian*, pp.112-113)

Today, and in a few weeks to come I want to share with you what I think the gifts community have to offer us as we live and be in this community of faith.

As I shared with you last week we are here because of Christ.

It is Christ, the head of the church, who has gathered us into community because the Christian life is not meant to be lived alone. We have come together to share our common life and our faith journeys in Christ in all of its experiences – joy and sorrow, change and challenge, triumph and defeat.

One thing we need to realize is that Jesus' vision and creation of community was pretty radical for his time and it still is for us today. His practice of community was cross cultural, counter-cultural, radically inclusive, kingdom-centered, God-centered, confrontational, sacrificial, healing-oriented, didactic, prayerful, non-institutional, political, and mission-oriented. And most of all, he practiced unconditional acceptance of those who temple or state, family or friends had decided to exclude for all kinds of reasons.

He ate with tax collectors, touched lepers, healed people possessed with unclean spirit, raised the dead, spoke to Samaritans, and kept friendship with women of disreputable pasts (Mary Magdalene). He challenged the practice of community of his time so radically that even his disciples questioned his actions (when he refused to meet his family) from time to time.

This morning's story from the gospel of John fits right into this pattern of radical acceptance. A woman who was found to have committed adultery, was brought before Jesus so that he should judge over her. Jesus was in the middle of publically teaching a great crowd, when this gaggle of men dragged her into the center. I think these men did not care about the woman or the Jewish law that she broke. They simply used her to get Jesus to say something that they could use against him to get rid of him. They said to Jesus, "She was caught red-handed. The law is very clear – stone her. What do you say?" Here is what they were thinking: if he shows mercy, we get him for being soft on the law; if he says, "Stone her," the Romans will get him because nobody but the Romans could issue any punishment.

While all of this is going on, the woman, trembling with guilt and fear, believes that she is about to die because the group of people stands around her with stone ready in their hands, just waiting for the word to throw.

They were all waiting. And then Jesus does a curious thing. He bends down and starts writing in the sand. What he writes, we don't know. But after a while he gets up, and says, "Go ahead, stone her. That is what the law says. There is just one rule you should think about. Let the man without sin go first." Then Jesus goes back to doodling in the sand.

Eventually the stone throwers, each one of them, realize that they all have sinned, some maybe just a little, others a lot, and they were in no position to judge anyone but themselves. They let go of their stones and left.

At the end of the story, only Jesus, the woman, and a pile of stones are left. He turned to her and asked, "Where are all the stone throwers? Has no one condemned you?" "No one," she said. And Jesus answers, "And neither do I!" But he does not stop there. He adds, "Go, and sin no more."

This story teaches us about acceptance. Jesus does not approve of her behavior. He sends her on her way with the advice to change her life. But he accepts her despite her brokenness and bad choice of cheating on her husband.

You and I know how important acceptance is in our lives and in the lives of those we share our life with. But I am not sure that really deeply understand how important it is. One of the deepest needs of the human heart is the need to be appreciated. Every human being wants to be valued and loved and accepted for what he or she is. Nothing in human life has such a lasting and fatal effect as the experience of not being completely accepted. When I am not accepted, then something is broken. Babies who are not loved and accepted don't develop to their full potential. A student who does not feel accepted by his teacher will not learn. A gay teen might commit suicide because her family rejects her. When people are looking for a church and they don't sense acceptance within the first five minutes, they are not likely to come back. A life without acceptance is a life in which a most basic human need goes unfulfilled.

Acceptance means that the people with whom we live give us a feeling of self-respect, a feeling that we are worthy. They are happy that we are who we are. Acceptance means that we are welcome to be ourselves. Acceptance means that though there is need for growth, we are not forced. We do not

have to be the person we are not! Neither are we locked in by our past or present. Rather we are given room to unfold, to outgrow the mistakes of the past.

Acceptance liberates everything that is in us. Only when we are loved in that deep sense of complete acceptance can we become ourselves. The love, the acceptance of other persons, makes us the unique person that we are meant to be.

Acceptance is an act of the heart. To accept someone means that even when they tell us their deepest and darkest secrets, we still love them patiently and compassionately. Acceptance does not mean that we tolerate any behavior a person chooses. Acceptance does not mean that we refuse to confront or challenge that in them which could harm others and damage their soul.

In our story, Jesus accepted the women and forgave her. He did not judge or condemn her, but told her that she is a child of God, even in her brokenness. It is this kind of acceptance that changes and saves lives.

As a community of faith we are in the business of changing and saving lives by accepting people into our midst and by loving them as they are. We are in this business of acceptance because we have been accepted by Christ – just as we are. Paul said in his letter to the Romans 15:7: “Accept each other as Christ has accepted you.”

Our ability to accept others is very much related to us having accepted ourselves. We get our sense of being accepted by the people who love us, yes, but as we mature and grow there should come a time when we start to like and love the person we are or are becoming – from the way we look to the personalities that are uniquely ours. Scripture teaches that all of us are made in God’s image. The 20th century theologian Paul Tillich claims that “faith is the courage to accept acceptance.” “I am accepted by God as I am, not as I should be.”

Self-acceptance is important when it comes to accepting others. Welcoming one another as Christ has welcomed us is more than a pious gesture.

Anyone who has come to our church before 2003, you most likely met a person who in my opinion was the personification of acceptance: Esther Smith. Those who have met her or were met by her, have a story to tell. Just after I had been called to serve this church, I received a note from Mrs. Guy Smith, telling me how excited she was that I had been chosen. That made me feel pretty good even though I did not know this person.

Esther loved people. She loved to hear their stories, and like nobody else made every new person or family welcomed at the church. She would spot them like a hawk a mile away. Esther would position herself at the bottom of the stairs, and greet people. She would alert us to newcomers to the church after every Sunday, giving us their addresses as well as their life's story and advising, "Please call them! They are going to be a great addition to the church." I wonder how many people joined the church because of her.

During the week, she would stop at the office twice a week and get the names of those who were sick at home or the hospital, and she would send them a card or call them on the phone. Yet more often, she would tell me who is ill or could use a pastoral call. That was Mrs. Guy Smith. She was a bit pushy at times, but in her heart she loved and accepted everybody who came through the doors of her church.

We might think that the Christians Church has always been a haven for acceptance of the great diversity of humankind; that She always practiced Jesus' radical call to acceptance. Sadly we know She has not been. The church (at large) is still debating who is in and who is out, who is worthy of love and acceptance, and who should look elsewhere. Our own statement of inclusion is a testament to our church's desire to be intentionally inviting, welcoming, and accepting. It was our way of following In Jesus path of practicing radical acceptance.

We might never know but a statement like that might save a young person's life who has or is struggling with their sexual identity, or it might tell the struggling single mother that here is a community that will support her if life gets too tough to handle on her own, or might tell the parents raising their disabled child in the midst of community that they are welcome here.

Acceptance is no small gift. It is a life-giving gift, maybe even the most important we can ever receive and we can ever give. May we use it as generously as we can in all that we do. Amen.

Sources:

¹ Howell, Patrick J., Second Sunday of Advent, Romans 15:4-13, FEASTING ON THE WORD Year A, vol. 1, p. 38.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.