

THE SAFE CHURCH
John 8:1-11

Sermon for Peace Church
November 11, 2007

PURPOSE - To shape the church into a community wherein people belong to one another in their forgiveness from Christ, thereby becoming a safe place.

MAIN IDEA - Jesus makes His place a safe place by calling His followers to look within to their own sinfulness, and from that safety He calls us forth to godly obedience of life.

I. INTRODUCTION

Let's open our Bibles to John 8:1

1. The Scriptures say that, in the church, we BELONG to one another like different parts of ONE BODY.

- your knee belongs to your hip which belongs to your elbow & nose.
- if your knee's not doing well, your nose knows it! (It doesn't get around to as many smells as it might otherwise!)
- We are the BODY OF CHRIST!

(i) So this month we're thinking about how we DEVELOP a deeper sense of belonging to one another - by looking at HOW JESUS DOES IT in this gospel of John.

A. Last Sunday we studied His MINISTRY OF ATTENTION!
= LOOKING at others, looking INTO them
= NAMING them - their strengths & gifts, giving destiny
= KNOWING THEM - their stories, the passions of their heart ... creates belonging

2. Today we want to think about building belonging by making the church a SAFE PLACE TO BE YOURSELF!

- It's a great challenge! A lot of people don't go to church because they sense that the church will not accept them for who they really are.
- But it's a NECESSARY challenge! The BEAUTY of God is known in diversity. So ... how can rich & poor, young and old, black and white, urban /

suburban - maybe even a farmer! - BELONG to one another SAFELY?

- It's a challenge ONLY ACCOMPLISHED IN JESUS!

3. Today we have a UNIQUE story from Jesus' life, one in which He is building SAFETY into His church.

- It's unique because Christian tradition, back to the earliest days, recognizes that this story is an AUTHENTIC EVENT in Jesus' life. However, it is debated where in the gospels it's suppose to fit.

(i) You'll see a little note above our passage, "*The earliest manuscripts and many other ancient witnesses do not have John 7:53-8:11.*"

- What that refers to is that for none of the books of the Bible do we have the ABSOLUTE ORIGINAL writings. We don't have the apostle John's manuscript. What we have are numerous copies of it, dating back to the early days of the church. And it's by comparing the many copies of John that we gain the clearest idea of what was the original writing. The EARLIER manuscripts are weighted more reliable - because the more copies made, the more errors tend to creep in. The SHORTER manuscripts are weighted more reliable - because people tend to add more than subtract in copying.

A. MANY manuscripts have this story in the gospels. Some have it in the gospel of Luke. More have it in the gospel of John, at this place. Yet, the earliest ones don't. So it may not have been part of John's original gospel, but it's always been recognized in the Church as a GENUINE EVENT in Jesus' life.

4. Therefore let's read it - that, by His Word & Spirit, Jesus might live this way among us!

Read John 8:1-11

II. THE CHURCH & PSEUDO-COMMUNITY

1. We have here a VERY DANGEROUS SITUATION:

(i) Obviously dangerous for this woman! ... surrounded by a group of men ... Who knows? They may already have the ROCKS in their hands.

(ii) It's dangerous for JESUS - because the whole scene is a ploy.

They are trying to TRAP Him into either USURPING Moses' authority - not carrying out what the Law prescribed ... or usurping ROME'S authority - it was not within Jewish rights under Rome to perform such executions.

- What would Jesus do? ... competing laws were trapping Him.

(iii) And, it could even be argued, it was dangerous for these Scribes & Pharisees - when your community gets established foundationally around rules of behavior, EVERYONE ends up walking around on EGGSHELLS!

2. That's what happened here! Someone broke the rules of the community!

(i) Now this was a pretty FLAGRANT violation. This woman was caught in adultery! She was probably engaged to another man. She broke a written rule!
... How does that get handled?

(ii) But violation of community rules needn't be that flagrant, especially those UNWRITTEN ones!

- She went into the kitchen and did what!?!
- He was waving his arms in the sanctuary?!
- How late did he show up to that meeting?!
- Where did she bring that coffee!?

... = THE UNWRITTEN RULES OF COMMUNITY

3. In his book on community-making titled, "The Different Drum", Scott Peck differentiates between TRUE COMMUNITY - where people are connected person to person, heart to heart - and PSEUDO-COMMUNITY - where people only belong to one another at the level of "appropriate behavior".

"The first response of a group seeking to form a community is most often to try to fake it", he writes (= pseudo-community). In pseudo-community it is as if every individual is operating according to the same book of etiquette.

Its basic PRETENSE is to deny INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCE - (Everyone just needs to figure out the cultural etiquette ... and abide by it as best they can. They not yet save to truly be themselves, lest they get SHAMED by the group.)

And so pseudo-community becomes conflict-AVOIDING versus conflict-RESOLVING.

(i) Now there's A LOT to think about - especially if one's family system is not very good at conflict-resolving.

4. The result, however, of pseudo-community is NOT THE CHURCH!

The result is what we call a CLUB, or a CLIQUE!

Webster's definition of a clique is: "A narrow exclusive circle of persons held together by common interests."

- That's NOT THE CHURCH! Cliques deny INDIVIDUALITY!

(i) The energy of a pseudo-community becomes focused on living up to the expectations of the group, not being one's TRUE, UNIQUE SELF!

A. Further, Peck states, "*Pseudo-community denies us the ability to share freely the things that we actually most have in common - our weakness, our incompleteness, our imperfection, in adequacy, sins, our lack of wholeness and self-sufficiency.*"

(i) Ken Medema once wrote this song about the Church:

If this is not a place where tears are understood, then where shall I go to cry?

If this is not a place where my spirit can take wings, then where shall I go to fly?

I don't need another place for trying to impress you with just how good and virtuous I am;

I don't need another place for always being on top of things, everybody knows that it's a sham.

I don't need another place for always wearing smiles even when it's not the way I feel.

So if this is not a place where my questions can be asked, then where shall I go to seek?

And if this is not a place where my heart cry can be heard, where, tell me where, shall I go to speak?

5. He's articulating the calling of the Church.

But churches so easily fall into pseudo-community - which suppresses difference and individuality; which leads us to wear smiles (or other masks) when it's not the way we feel.

(i) SO HOW DO WE become a church that extends belonging to people for who they are uniquely ... truly?

That safety happens as we belong to one another as forgiven sinners in Jesus.

- That's the teaching of our passage.

III. HOW JESUS CREATES A SAFE CHURCH

Notice how the Lord BUILDS SAFETY into His Church here:

- He does it by calling us to LOOK WITHIN and find what all of us have IN COMMON with this adulterous woman.

1. She is brought before Him in such a way that UNDOUBTEDLY His own Spirit was angered. She is treated like an OBJECT LESSON. These men have no concern for her. They're using her, like a snare to trap Him.

Such treatment violates Jesus' community with the Father - in love & truth.

(i) But He looks within. He takes time to think, to pray.

- He bends down and writes on the ground - so that He might respond in grace to these men.

A. That in itself will begin to make us safer people - if we just stop REACTING to people who do things different than the way we do and pray through our feelings.

2. Then Jesus straightens up - and says, "*If any of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her.*" = LOOK WITHIN

"Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plan in your own eye? (- Mt. 7) ... LOOK WITHIN.

- This is how we become a safe church = create a fellowship of sinners forgiven in Christ.

(i) I find that principle also helps me become a safe DRIVER. When someone cuts me off and I'm ready to go into ROAD-RAGE MODE, I try to think of times when, intentionally or inadvertently, I surely cut off people.

Looking within makes us safe on the road ... in the Council Room ... the sanctuary and the kitchen, the foyer - wherever we're called to create community.

A. *Brothers & sisters, writes James, anyone who condemns his brother speaks against the law and judges it. When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it. There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you - who are you to condemn your neighbor? (4:12)*

LOOK WITHIN - not to find religious pride or ethnic smugness, but to find what you have in common with this woman - weakness, inadequacy, failure, sin.

3. The religious leaders DO THIS ... and the OLDER ONES - who know themselves better (that's what aging's about) - DROP THEIR STONES - or at least, walk away!

4. JESUS IS LEFT with this woman. He has protected her from stoning by these men.

- BUT WILL HE STONE HER?

- He alone has the right to - He who was without sin.

But He doesn't - *Neither do I condemn you!*

(i) It eventually COST Jesus to become such a SHIELD for us. It led to His STONING DEATH OF THE CROSS.

- Dying to take upon Himself the JUST ANGER of a HOLY GOD against sin, in substitution for His church.

- That's how He made the church a safe place.

A. By doing that, He took away any grounds we ever have for looking down on others who are different, even sinfully different.

HIS CHURCH IS UNITED AT THE CROSS - that's where we belong to one another - AS FORGIVEN SINNERS.

(ii) "I'M NOT OK, YOU'RE NOT OK ... BUT THAT'S OK" - because Jesus does not condemn us - that's the CULTURE OF A SAFE CHURCH.

- a place where people can be themselves and belong

A. That doesn't mean that genuine community still doesn't take work. Differences are real & we'll struggle to work through them. But we don't shame others for being different.

B. Worse still, sin happens. We hurt one another. So we need to learn to communicate, not attack - and resolve differences. That keeps HEARTS CONNECTED.

- Genuine community takes effort & skill.

C. But the FOUNDATION of all true community is belonging in Christ as forgiven sinners.

Without it, we walk around SHAMING or FEELING SHAMED for being different.

Without it, we settle for DISTANT RELATIONSHIPS - pseudo-community, wearing masks.

5. In our story, even these proud religious leaders became SAFER MEN when, in Jesus, God had them LOOK WITHIN.

How is God becoming personal & intimate WITH YOU TODAY?

- With whom are you tempted to pick up stones?

- What is God asking you to look at within?

... so that we can move to community in Christ.

V. CONCLUSION

Let me conclude by pointing out the IMPORTANCE of becoming a safe church.

1. Verse 11 - After Jesus says, “Neither do I condemn you”, He adds: “*Go now and LEAVE YOUR LIFE OF SIN*”

- He doesn't leave this woman just as she is. He doesn't compromise on God's will. God hates adultery. Jesus calls her forth to godly obedience.

2. THAT'S THE CHURCH - we're here to help people become all that God intends them to be = to a life of joyful obedience.

- But the culture from which we do that is first SAFETY. When that's in place, we have opportunity to point people in the direction of God's “good, pleasing and perfect” will.

(i) Having been protected and forgiven by Christ, I'm sure this woman WITH GLADNESS began to pursue a life of godly purity.

- May God use us likewise to lead others into His will, as we become SAFE PEOPLE, A SAFE CHURCH ...

... belonging to one another in Jesus' name. AMEN!