

“WHICH DO YOU PREFER?”

John 3:17-21

**Market Square Presbyterian Church in the City of
Harrisburg, Pennsylvania**

The Reverend Thomas A. Sweet

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People often ask me how to interpret scripture. The primary and most important principle in regard to interpreting the Bible is that scripture is the best interpreter of scripture. Any single part of the Bible is best understood in light of the whole. To illustrate, there is a story that occurs later in John’s gospel that interprets and illumines our gospel reading this morning. The Pharisees have brought to Jesus a woman caught in the act of adultery.¹ They seek to trap Jesus by pitting him against Moses. The Pharisees reminded that Moses taught that such a person is to be stoned. What does he, Jesus, say?

Jesus bends down and writes with his finger in the dirt. When the Pharisees persist with their question, Jesus stands up and looks at them and says, *“Let anyone who is without sin be the first to cast a stone.”* Then Jesus stoops again and writes on the ground a second time. These symbolic actions and words of Jesus are kingdom-of-God light shining into a shadowy world. Darkness is exposed. Admittedly, darkness can be a good thing – seeds take root in the darkness of the soil and babies grow in the dark of the womb – but the metaphor in our passage today refers to anything that stands in the way of our becoming truly and fully human after the manner and example of Christ.

Let me say more. In another example of scripture interpreting scripture, Exodus 34 describes how the two tablets of the law, otherwise known as the Ten Commandments, were written with “the finger of God” just as Jesus in the story we just recounted wrote in the dirt with his finger. Moses took the tablets down the mountain into the camp of the Israelites. That is when Moses found the people worshipping a golden calf and in his fury threw down the stone tablets and they broke. When Moses returned a second time up the mountain, God said to him, *“Cut two tablets of stone like the former ones, and I will write a second time the words that were on the former*

¹ John 8:1-11

tablets, the ones that you broke."² If the postman always rings twice, God apparently always writes twice.

The symbolism of Jesus twice writing on the ground is not lost on the Pharisees. They knew the Old Testament reference and interpreted the action as a claim by Jesus that he is divine. The Pharisees explained to Jesus their desire to stone the woman is motivated by the teaching of Moses. But Jesus, who knows a thing or two about the Mosaic law, refuted them saying the context for the Ten Commandments is *mercy*, not judgment. Instead of wreaking punishment on the Israelites, God wrote the commandments a second time because he knew the process of learning to live as a community of free people after years in slavery is hard.

Thus, the Pharisees are exposed. If it is not Moses and it is not God who motivated the Pharisees' punitive proclivity, from where did it come? Could it be they were trying to use Moses and their religion as a cover for the dark places in their own hearts they now were projecting onto the woman? Do *we* not sometimes judge others because of what is going on in our own hearts and lives?

As the Pharisees drop their stones and slink away from the woman whom Jesus had championed, they effectively lose their identity as the righteous guardians and enforcers of what they wrongly interpreted as the unforgiving law of God. We see the repressed darkness in their lives being played out. It is not that the Pharisees were bad men. They were respected among the people and there was much to commend them. But the darkness in them – their moralisms, legalisms, deep-rooted anger, their too-eager zeal to sit in judgment of others – caused the peace and promises of God to elude them and their witness was compromised.

Jesus offered the Pharisees a new identity. They were sinners like everyone else no matter their cloak of religious knowledge and authority. Jesus tendered them a new status as forgiven sinners who thus have no need or right to throw stones at others. But they had been slinging stones in defense of their interpretation of the law for so long they had become attached to that understanding and identity. It was too formidable and forbidding for them to think of repenting and changing. So, after hearing Jesus question their authority to stone the woman, "*they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders.*"³ It is one of the saddest scenes in the Bible.

For a moment, those Pharisees were perched on the precipice of freedom. They were almost there. But they turned back. The light had exposed the deficiency of their interpretation of the law and their actions. "Come into the light," Jesus said. But they preferred the darkness. Their

² Exodus 34:1 though the story extends from Exodus 31:18-34:28

³ John 8:9

preference for the darkness became the free choice of self-condemnation, *condemning themselves* to a lesser life than Jesus offered.

God does not condemn. *“God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”*⁴ We convict ourselves by preferring the familiarity of the darkness to the liberation of the light. Sometimes we do not want to be exposed by the light. *“This is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil.”*⁵ (Evil in the Bible, by the way, is not code for Hitler-esque brutishness but any thought or action that contradicts or is contrary to the ways and will of God.)

Do you hear? We are not condemned for any darkness that is in us but only for refusing to come into the light. And it is self-condemnation. Why do we not come into the light? Why do we shy away from it? Because we do not want others to see behind our public personas. Because we do not want others to know some of the things we have done or are doing in our lives. We like “keeping others in the dark” about ourselves. *“All who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed.”*⁶

We do not want the light of God’s righteousness to shine on our checkbooks to show where our priorities really are. We do not want the light of God’s inclusive love to shine on our penchant to separate and exclude. We do not want the light of God’s grace to shine on our own hard-heartedness. We do not want the light of God’s largesse to shine on our greed or the light of God’s generosity to shine on our withholding. We do not want the light of God’s justice to shine on our own social and economic privilege. We do not want the light of God’s singleness of heart to shine on our duplicity or the light of God’s forgiveness to shine on our stiff-necked refusal to show mercy.

The Pharisees walked away from Jesus because they wanted to preserve their right to sit in judgment and to throw stones another day. They did not want to change or to be changed by the light that Jesus was shining on the way life works in the kingdom of God.

Perhaps the way they always had done things did not seem like darkness to the Pharisees because they had been doing them for so long. It was business as usual, the way things long had been, the way things were, the way they knew, the way that benefited themselves at the expense of others. It was “tradition.” They had misinterpreted the law for so long they convinced themselves the misinterpretation actually was the law. But the true Light came into the world in

⁴ John 3:17

⁵ John 3:19

⁶ John 3:20

Jesus Christ and it angered the Pharisees for they had been the religious lights and no one likes to lose their authority.

It happens to us, too. The darkness in our own lives imprisons us and shackles us to our past because we fear being exposed by the light that is meant to be our salvation. Our social darkness too long has compromised the rights and dignity of people of color, female people, gay people, transgender people, people of little means or voice, and those of religions different than our own.

Some still walk away from the light and prefer the darkness. But others, receptive to God's Spirit and the leading of the Lord, repent, go beyond their present mind and heart, and move toward the light, and then some more do the same, and the moral arc bends toward God's justice and that is how life is refreshed and renewed. Which do you prefer, the darkness or the light?

In the Psalms we read, *"In God's light, we see light."*⁷ That is how it works. *"Those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may clearly be seen that their deeds have been done in God."*⁸

For a long time I glossed over our text from John because it sounded unbelievable. Who, I thought, having a chance to live in the light would choose the darkness? But when I stop to take stock of my own life and come face to face with my too-many ways and times of preferring darkness, I better understand its attraction. In some ways, it is easier. I can hide in the darkness. I can fool some of the people at least some of the time. I can keep to myself. I do not have to face up to my actions. I can keep my own counsel instead of God's.

But I really do not want to dwell in the darkness. It is a prison house. It lowers the bar of our humanity. It is lonely even though many live there. So, what do we do? How do we get the courage to come to the light? God's Spirit lives in us to remind us that we belong to the Light and to the Lord. Pray the Holy Spirit to help you. Ask the Holy Spirit to give you courage to wade through your fear and the assurance that what you will find in the light surpasses any faux comfort found in the darkness and that God will lead you into peace.

There is only self-condemnation and the gospel invites you to let it go, to let it go. St. Paul says, *"There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."*⁹ Remember God's love will

⁷ Psalm 36:9

⁸ John 3:21

⁹ Romans 8:1

never, not ever, let you go.¹⁰ Trust God. Trust God enough to walk out of the darkness into God's marvelous, magnificent light¹¹ and live!

Amen.

¹⁰ Romans 8:39

¹¹ 1 Peter 2:9