All Saints (Year C)

Well, in a few days we’ll head to the polls again for the 2022 midterm election. It’s not my job to tell you how to vote but, as your pastor, I can - and will - encourage you *to* vote. It’s not my job to tell you to vote one way or another but, as your pastor, I can - and will - encourage you not only to vote with your interests in mind but also, and perhaps even more so, the interests of your *neighbor*. Because that’s the Christian response in these times and in all times; to be neighborly to one another.

My name is Stephen, and I’m grateful to be your neighbor! Already in the few weeks that I’ve been your neighbor, I’ve been shown such incredible graciousness and hospitality. As I mentioned earlier, between my broken wrist, and us moving with our two small children, and setting up our house and my office, and then with Tricia’s unexpected trip to the emergency room a few days ago, this congregation has been stellar in helping us out and showing us how important hospitality is to this congregation. And we can’t wait to reciprocate that and continue to grow together as disciples of a Savior who compels us to make hospitality our muse.

But that’s not always easy or natural; especially when God calls us to be compassionate and merciful to, you know, *that* person. *That* neighbor. *That* coworker. *That* immigrant or refugee*. That* person who looks different, or loves different, or sounds different than you*.* The scribes and the pharisees put their own spin on it in today’s gospel lesson, asking Jesus what should be done with “women like *this.*” Maybe you’ve considered another person to be *that person* or perhaps you yourself know what it’s like to be labeled *that person*. And the difficult, and blessed, charge of the Gospel is that we are called to show neighborliness and hospitality - even and especially - to *that person.* It doesn’t mean we have to agree with them. It doesn’t mean that we don’t hold one another accountable. It also doesn’t mean that we compromise on our commitment to justice and mercy. But it *does* mean is that we must *never* lose sight of the beloved child of God that resides within those with which we disagree or disapprove.

Today’s story from John’s Gospel, I think, gives us a template for how to approach neighborliness in such divisive times. As it turns out, to my knowledge, I’ve never preached on this rather familiar passage. Perhaps that’s because it never shows up in the revised common lectionary and that tends to be the source of my preaching texts. But the lectionary texts for this Sunday didn’t spark much for me and I wanted to begin our time together with intentionality for this particularly time and place as we begin our discipleship journey together. And so, today’s passage was the first one that popped into my mind to hopefully help set the tone for the next chapter of this wonderful congregation.

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*John 8:1-11*

*And Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. Early in the morning he returned to the temple. All the people gathered around him, and he sat down and taught them. The legal experts and Pharisees brought a woman caught in adultery. Placing her in the center of the group, they said to Jesus, “Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of committing adultery. In the Law, Moses commanded us to stone women like this. What do you say?” They said this to test him, because they wanted a reason to bring an accusation against him. Jesus bent down and wrote on the ground with his finger.*

*They continued to question him, so he stood up and replied, “Whoever hasn’t sinned should throw the first stone.” Bending down again, he wrote on the ground. Those who heard him went away, one by one, beginning with the elders. Finally, only Jesus and the woman were left in the middle of the crowd.*

*Jesus stood up and said to her, “Woman, where are they? Is there no one to condemn you?” She said, “No one, sir.” Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you. Go, and from now on, don’t sin anymore.”*

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For those of y’all on social media, have you ever come across (or perhaps written one yourself) a post that *you know* is gonna be a complete and utter dumpster fire? You know what I’m talking about. Someone posts something political, on either side of the spectrum, and you get out your lawn chair and grab your popcorn and wait for the comment section to blow up. The name calling begins. Each comment tends to escalate in tone, getting more and more defensive and combative. Then come the passive aggressive GIF’s and the snarky comebacks. Both sides retreat into their respective corners and then the comments start to be typed in ALL CAPS. That’s when you know you’ve reached the point of no return; there is no way this comment thread is ending happily and, frankly, it was probably doomed from the start.

I want us to think of today’s passage as a situation that held the potential to devolve into just such a dumpster fire. But the way Jesus responds gives us a much different outcome. So let’s pay close attention to this text and what God is saying to God’s church.

The scribes and pharisees are itchin’ for a fight. They know it. Jesus knows it. The crowd that has amassed to witness the drama knows it, too. These church leaders have brought before Jesus a woman who, they say, was caught in the act of adultery. Now, right from the beginning, there are a few red flags that need to be brought to light. First of all, as far as we know, there are no official witnesses to the actual act of adultery. The scribes and pharisees say she was “caught” but give no evidence of any official witnesses; according to Mosaic law, two witnesses were required for such an accusation to be taken seriously. The second red flag is this: even if there were two people who said they witnessed the event; the testimony of a woman in those days was not admissible in court. A woman could easily be the victim of assault and be accused of adultery in an effort to get the man off the hook, knowing that she couldn’t defend herself. Which brings us to the third red flag: where’s the dude? We all know it takes two to tango. If this woman was supposedly “caught in the act,” it would be safe to assume the identity of the guy isn’t a mystery. According to Mosaic law, the man was also to be punished for participating in such sinful activity.

And so, from the get-go, Jesus has the wisdom to know that this isn’t really about the woman; he knows that she’s being used as a pawn to justify the scribes’ and the pharisees’ self-righteousness. They’re deliberately trying to draw Jesus into conflict and this woman is the collateral damage. It’s a lose/lose situation: if his argument is that the woman should go free, he is flaunting the law. If he argues that she should be stoned to death, he’s compromising his message of love, mercy, and forgiveness.

And Jesus’ response to this war-mongering effort to draw him into a lose/lose situation? To doodle in the sand.

Now, there have been thousands of folks who, over the years, have come up with their own hypotheses as to what exactly Jesus was doodling in the sand.[[1]](#footnote-2) Some have speculated that Jesus was writing a verse from Jeremiah 17 that talks about “writing in the sand” before those who have turned away from God. Others have noted that it was the practice of Roman judges to write down their verdicts before announcing them out loud and Jesus is perhaps satirically doing the same himself. The bottom line is this: you and I have no idea what Jesus wrote in the sand and any guess to what he wrote can be nothing more than mere speculation.

But that doesn’t mean that don’t have anything to learn from the act itself.

[go down to the middle of the platform, kneel, and pretend to doodle]

Now, what do you hear? Nothing.

By doodling in the sand, Jesus pushes the pause button and invokes silence in a particularly tense and escalating situation. To return briefly to our metaphor of the controversial social media post that’s about to turn into a dumpster fire: it’s not like Jesus is turning off the comments so much as forcing an intentional pause so that everyone has to take five minutes to breathe before returning to the conversation. Perhaps Jesus is forcing the silence to let everyone “simmer down” a little bit. Or perhaps he’s using the silence to take some time to make sure that *his* response to the situation is a faithful, righteous, and gracious one that respects the dignity of all parties involved while still doing the *right* thing.

It reminds me of a quote by Fred Rogers: “Our society is much more interested in information than wonder, in noise rather than silence...And I feel that we need a lot more wonder and a lot more silence in our lives.”[[2]](#footnote-3) To Mr. Rogers’ point, I don’t think we live in a society that rewards those of us who are silent or practice the spiritual discipline of listening. Instead, we live in a society that rewards, in various ways, those who are the loudest voice in the room. And, yes, I do note the irony that in this moment I am, in fact, literally the loudest voice in this room. However, those of us who are preachers would do well to take Mr. Rogers’ point to heart, and to listen just as much, if not more so, than we speak when we leave the pulpit.

And so, the first thing Jesus accomplishes by doodling in the sand is to invoke silence to interrupt the conflict and establish some space for reflection. Now, the second thing he accomplishes by *kneeling* down to doodle is this:

[go down to the middle of the platform, kneel, and pretend to doodle]

In the theatre world, there’s concept known as “blocking.” Blocking a scene is done in the initial stages of rehearsing when all of the actors walk through the scene together and establish the movements of the characters and discern together the action of the scene and what’s happening. If we “block” this particular story of Jesus with the scribes and pharisees, we can better appreciate what Jesus is trying to do in his physical actions.

Imagine the scene: Jesus and the woman are in the middle, surrounded on all sides by the scribes, the pharisees, and the curious onlookers. The woman is, presumably, on the ground and Jesus is the focal point, standing in the middle. But then Jesus kneels down and removes himself from everyone’s line of sight. Now, the scribes and the pharisees are no longer looking at Jesus. Who are they now forced to look at? Each other!

If the first lesson we’ve learned is the value of silence and reflection in divisive conflict, the second lesson is that Jesus wants to spend less time casting stones and more times assessing ourselves, practicing holy curiosity for how we can be neighborly towards one another. Rather than make himself the center of attention, Jesus intentionally took the focus away from him to center the onlookers on themselves, forcing them - and us - to ask ourselves the following question: are we contributing to the neighborliness of our community, or are we acting in ways that diminish it?

But the scribes and pharisees still force the issue; they are, I think, dumbfounded by Jesus’ refusal to fall into their trap. Jesus straightens up and says the words that we’ve heard so many times: “Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” And then, again, he crouches down and keeps on doodling. And one by one, they all disappear. The dumpster fire never came to be. The point was made. Mercy was given. Justice was done. And Jesus didn’t have to so much as speak that much, or even raise his voice.

I want to leave us this day with a story that has stuck with me over the past several years. A friend and former congregant of mine is a gifted journalist and writer named Tom Junod. A couple decades ago, while living in New York City and writing for Esquire magazine, Tom was called into his editor’s office. “Tom,” he said, “I’m sending you to Pittsburgh tomorrow for a new assignment.” Tom said, “Ok. Who’s in Pittsburgh that you want me to interview?” His editor said, “Fred Rogers.” My friend Tom paused and said, “You mean, *Mister* Rogers, the children’s show guy?” His editor replied, “That’s the one. We’re doing an edition on “Heroes” and I want you to write an article on him for our cover story.”

And so, Tom flew to Pittsburgh and interviewed Mister Rogers, and such began a close relationship between the two, enduring up until Fred Rogers died in 2003. If you’ve seen the movie “A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood” featuring Tom Hanks as Mister Rogers, it turns out that that story is based off of Tom’s relationship with Fred. And so, fast forward to the year 2020. That was a fun year, wasn’t it?! Remember that? The beginning of the pandemic. The murder of George Floyd and the eruption of the Black Lives Matter protests. Everyone was arguing about masks, COVID policies. And in the middle of all of that was the turmoil of the Trump administration and the presidential election between him and Joe Biden. Our country seemed to be falling apart and those of us (with the notable exception perhaps of folks who are old enough to have lived through the 60’s) had never seen this country so divided and tense.

In the months leading up to the election, I called up my friend Tom over zoom and asked him, as I had so many times before, about his friendship with Fred Rogers. I told him I knew I certainly wasn’t the only person who grew up with Mr. Rogers who wondered what he’d have to say about the current events if he was still alive. I then turned to Tom and asked him a question that I now see as a rather foolish one. I asked Tom, “If Fred were still alive, how would he argue?” Tom paused, look at me with a gentle smile through the computer screen and said to me a sentence that I’ll never forget. Tom said, “Stephen, Fred didn’t have to argue; he *was* the argument.”

On this, the first worship service to mark the beginning of our time together, I commend these words to you. I don’t want us to argue; I want us to *be the argument*.

I don’t want us to argue; I want us to *be the argument;* the argument for the kind of church that values neighborliness over and above all else and refuses to let the division so rampant in our country to obscure our focus on the Gospel.

I don’t want us to argue; I want us to *be the argument* for a kind of community where we strive to practice the kind of forbearance Jesus demonstrates in today’s passage. The preacher Nancy Taylor wrote the following about today’s passage and I want to commend it to you. She writes, “The world eggs us on to judge others. It expects it of us. The way of the Christian is different. The way of the Christian is the way of forbearance; and because the way of forbearance is countercultural and counterintuitive, it must be learned. Forbearance…emanates from the one who in the face of pulsing temples, flaring nostrils, and veins as big as ropes, bends down, makes himself vulnerable, diverts the accusers’ attention from the accused, and causes a pause in the action…Jesus gently invites and encourages us in living a life of humility and clear-eyed assessment of ourselves and our community.”[[3]](#footnote-4)

I don’t want us to argue; I want us to *be the argument* for a kind of faith family where we teach our children that our commitment to justice must never allow ourselves to dehumanize the person with whom we disagree on how that’s done. We must not devolve into shaming *that person*. Brené Brown once tweeted the following: “Shame is not a moral compass or a social justice tool. It’s a tool of oppression.” In today’s passage, the scribes and the pharisees were weaponizing shame to dehumanize the accused woman and Jesus refused to sink to that level in order to score some points in an argument.

I don’t want us to argue; I want us to *be the argument* for a kind of Christianity that isn’t used to score political points or manipulated in order to gain popularity, influence, and affluence (three things that Jesus never seemed to care about much). Instead, I want us to *be the argument* for a Christianity that remains laser-focused on doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly. And of those three mandates - to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly - we must lever let our pursuit of the first to be done at the expense of the second and third.

And, finally, I don’t want us to argue; I want us to *be the argument* for a kind of world where the stranger, the immigrant, the refugee, the person on the other side of the aisle or the other side of railroad tracks, where *that person* is seen, first and foremost, as a beloved child of God, worthy of kindness, dignity, and respect no less than the rest of us.

And I also want to be perfectly clear about what “being the argument instead of arguing” does *not* mean. It doesn’t mean that we will always remain neutral in all situations. Desmond Tutu once beautifully said: “If the elephant has its foot on the tail of the mouse, the mouse will not appreciate your neutrality in the situation.” It should be noted that though Jesus did de-escalate the situation in today’s passage; he also took a side. He clearly sided with the woman and valued her well-being over and above those who were using her for their own self-interest.

I also want to be clear that “being the argument instead of arguing” does not mean that we can’t have important discussions about issues that affect our community, our neighbors, our congregation, and our individual faith journeys. This congregation already has a great history of having such important conversations as a way for us to grow together as disciples. And together, we will continue to build upon that foundation. But we must do so in a way that upholds the dignity and values the humanity of the person with whom we differ.

And finally, “being the argument instead of arguing” does not mean that we always avoid conflict of any sort. Jesus did flips tables and drive out animals with a whip. But, as best as I can tell, he pulled that card pretty rarely. And I think it’s that he knew that there’s a time and place for flipping tables but also that that time and place must be chosen carefully and used sparingly.

Now, I also want to be perfectly clear about one last thing. I’ve doled out of a lot of spiritual advice over the last fifteen minutes. I do ***not***stand before you this day as one who has “mastered” this art (just ask my wife!). But I’m trying to do better and I think you’re here today with me because you want to do better, too. Together, we are all works in progress and the journey of Christian discipleship is a lifelong one, with many twists and turns, ups and downs, and infinite opportunities for growth (thanks be to God!).

So friends, together, let’s let some stones fall from our fingers and let’s *be the argument*.

In the name of God the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, let all of God’s beloved children say: **amen**.

1. https://christianityfaq.com/what-did-jesus-write-in-the-sand/ [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/9275200-our-society-is-much-more-interested-in-information-than-wonder [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Feasting on the Gospels, John Volume II, p. 250-252. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)