April 30, 2023

Rick Myatt

GETTING RID OF THE HOCKEY BAG

John 8:1-11

Laurie’s recent bout with laryngitis reminded me of a true story I read that was written by a woman named Suzanne Peppers. She reported about what happened when she had a bad case of laryngitis. Suzanne’s voice was completely absent for a week. One day during that silent week she went to a fast food restaurant to get lunch. This presented her with a conundrum because there was no way she could speak loudly enough to make herself heard ordering her food. What could she do? She hit on the idea of writing a note. She got a napkin and wrote “LARYNGITIS” and underlined it. Underneath she wrote that she wanted a #18 combo meal with a medium drink. When she got to the young woman at the counter she handed her the note. The girl totally ignored the note and said, “To go or for here?” Suzanne mouthed the words “To go.” The girl said, “What?” Suzanne realized mouthing words was not going to work so she took the napkin again and pointed to the word laryngitis. The girl still ignored her and said somewhat impatiently, “Do you want to eat here or do you want the food to go?” Now frustrated Suzanne waved the note in front of the girl’s face to try to get her to pay attention to it. Finally, she took the note, read it and said, “Ma’am, we don’t have large nachos.” Suzanne wrote, “Do you have any idea how hard it is to laugh hysterically without a voice?” She now realized that she was apparently suffering from a bad case of large nachos. The girl then turned to another employee next to her and asked, “Do we have large nachos?” The other employee looked at the note and said, “I think she can’t talk. Just ring up number 18.” Then the first girl picked up a pen and wrote on the napkin, “Chicken, beef, or pork” as though Suzanne was deaf.

Wow, it’s a little dismaying how dense people can be, and how aggravating. We can forgive people for being dense. They likely can’t help it. But what are we supposed to do when people are aggravating because they are selfish or thoughtless or unkind? How do we deal with people who are just difficult? The fact is, there are a lot of people who are failing in many ways, and it is easy for us to be disdainful or judgmental toward them. A correlated question is, how are we to deal with it when we are the ones who have erred, who fail, who fall short and we know it? Today we’re going to look at the story of a person who failed badly, had no excuse, and was exposed and threatened by that failure. We will learn a lot from how Jesus related to this person. Let’s look at John 8:1-11.

JESUS’ OPPONENTS SPRANG A TRAP

Most versions of the Bible have a note prefacing this section of John saying something like, “The earliest manuscripts and many other ancient witnesses do not include John 8:1-ll.” This passage is absent in the best early manuscripts of the Bible. John 8:12 follows directly from John 7:52. As a result, most modern scholars believe that this story was not part of John’s original writing. Many decide that since it was likely not written by John and included in his gospel, we should ignore it. We should not regard it as a genuine part of God’s authoritative word.

However, there is good evidence that this incident actually did take place in Jesus’ life. There are indications that this story was in documents about Jesus’ life that circulated early on in the churches. Scholars are pretty sure that there were a number of sources that the gospel writers used as source material when they wrote their accounts of Jesus’ life. This story likely was in some of them. There are several early church fathers that alluded to this account as a genuine event in the life of Christ. I came to the conclusion that this was probably an authentic incident in Jesus’ life, and that as a result we can learn from it. So let’s consider this story.

Jesus was in the temple area, teaching people early in the day. Jesus’ main opponents, the religious leaders, the Pharisees and scribes, hauled a woman before him. Verses 4-5 tell us they said, “This woman was caught in the act of adultery. In the Law, Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?” John informs us in verse 6 that the whole thing was a trap. In other words, they had no interest in what Jesus really thought, or in the woman they brought before him. Their goal was to put Jesus in an impossible situation.

I can’t help but wonder how this woman was “caught in adultery.” How did that come about? But if she were caught in adultery, that’s not a one person activity. Where’s the man she committed adultery with? Why is he not standing before Jesus too? Leviticus 20:10 is the verse that gives the commandment the religious leaders were referring to. It says, “If a man commits adultery with another man’s wife, with the wife of his neighbor, both the adulterer and the adulteress shall surely be put to death.” Notice that the verse doesn’t say anything about stoning.

However, the bigger issue is that the verse said both the man and the woman who committed adultery should be put to death. Where was the man? Why did the religious leaders bring only the woman to Jesus? Unfortunately for women, the ancient first century Jewish culture was deeply sexist. It was heavily biased against women. One manifestation of that was that women were blamed for cases of adultery. That’s not surprising given that all the religious leaders were men. As a result when adultery occurred it was always assumed that some poor man succumbed to the wiles and lures of a woman. Yeah, that’s how it usually goes, right? It’s easy to understand why there has been a feminist movement in our society, because women have been mistreated throughout history, and this was one ugly example.

So there was a lot wrong in this situation. Both the motives and the execution of the incident by the religious leaders had serious problems. They obviously were not bringing this woman to get Jesus’ opinion on how to handles the situation. They weren’t the least bit interested in what he thought. They were the experts, he was the heretic, so who cares what he thought? They also didn’t care about the woman and what happened with her. They were also not concerned about the level of morality in Judea. But what, then, was the point of this trap?

The plan was to put Jesus in a no win situation. No matter how he responded he would lose. One option for Jesus was to take pity on the woman and say that she should not be stoned to death. If he took that option, his opponents would then say he was advocating disobedience to God’s Law. It plainly stated that the penalty for adultery was death. To refuse to apply that penalty in this situation was to disobey God’s Law.

The other option was for Jesus to tell the people the woman should be executed as the Law required. History tells us that Law was never consistently obeyed in Israel. The religious leaders who set up this trap never applied that Law, which reveals the level of their hypocrisy in this situation. If Jesus applied that Law in this situation it would have been seen by all as harsh and cruel. He would have been despised by people. It also would have gotten Jesus in trouble with the Romans. They did not allow the first century Jews to employ capital punishment. If Jesus had recommended stoning the woman not only would he have been despised by the people, he also would have been in big trouble with the Roman authorities for inciting a murder.

JESUS TURNED THE TABLES ON HIS OPPONENTS

Jesus seemed to have no good options. To stone or not to stone, either way he went he was going to lose. At least it seemed that way to the religious leaders. Jesus’ response was brilliant. The first thing he did was started scribbling in the dirt with his finger. People have come up with a plethora of suggestions about what he was writing, such as he was writing the sins of the woman’s accusers, he was writing their names, and so on. But what did This passage say about it? It doesn’t say anything about what Jesus wrote in the dirt. So we don’t know what he wrote and we’re never going to know. Anything other than admitting that is pure guessing. This also means we don’t need to know, otherwise that information would have been included.

Why was Jesus writing in the dirt? My guess is he was tweaking his opponents’ noses. They hoped to cause him to freak out, and by calmly sitting there doodling in the dirt he made it obvious that he wasn’t the least bit intimidated, nor did he feel pressured to answer them immediately. I wouldn’t be surprised if he was drawing cartoon figures in the dirt to show that he was amused by their attempts to trap him.

Finally, since they kept demanding an answer, he stood up and answered their question. He essentially said, “Sure, go ahead and stone her. Let the person who has no sin in his life take the first shot.” In an instant the tables were turned. Jesus put the ball squarely in his opponents’ court. They would either have to admit they were bluffing the whole time and let the whole thing go, or they would have to claim to be perfect and sinless and take their shot. That was a problem for them on two fronts. First, they would have to claim to be perfect, and everyone would know they were not. Second, even if they were so full of themselves as to make that claim, by proceeding with stoning the woman they would have fallen into their own trap. They would be seen by the people as grossly harsh and cruel. They would end up despised, just like they hoped Jesus would be. And they would be in trouble with the Roman authorities.

One by one people the crowd began to fade away until no one was left. Jesus was left alone with the poor woman. You have to feel for her. She apparently was guilty as charged. She had no defense. So she began with feeling guilt. But that had been served with a large helping of shame and condemnation. The woman was humiliated in front of everyone. In addition to that she had been badly frightened. There she was being humiliated in front of a crowd, but worse, the powerful people were talking about killing her, and in a most painful way. She knew that no one in that crowd gave a hoot what happened to her.

When the crowd finally melted away Jesus asked the woman. “Did no one condemn you?” He knew that none of them had. But he wanted to draw her attention to the fact that she was now free of her accusers and didn’t need to fear what anyone might say or do to her. When she said that no one had condemned her, Jesus said, “Neither do I. Now go and change the way you live.” It is important to notice the order of what he said to the woman. He didn’t say to her, “Go clean up your life, and if you can do that then I won’t condemn you either. You’ll be forgiven.” The forgiveness came first. In response to the grace you’ve been given, out of gratitude, go and change the way you’ve been living. She didn’t have to earn the forgiveness. It was given to her freely.

APPLICATION

WE MUST FIRST ANSWER TWO QUESTIONS

There are two questions this passage raises in my mind. First, isn’t the Old Testament Law terribly harsh? Adultery is a terrible act. It is a betrayal of love, it is a violation of one’s promise, it destroys people and families. So it is a terrible thing, deserving of some consequence. But doesn’t the death penalty seem out of proportion? Isn’t it extreme? Doesn’t it seem like there is a difference between the harshness of the Old Testament and the compassion and grace of the New? A second question has to do with how Jesus could ignore that command from Leviticus. He claimed that not even a letter of God’s Law would pass away. Yet here he seems to ignore what the Law said about the consequence for adultery. How could he do that?

We’ll start with that first question. Isn’t the Old Testament Law harsh? It sure seems like it. Exodus 21:17 says, “Anyone who curses their father or mother is to be put to death.” Um, what now? A teenager has an alcoholic father who has beaten his wife and his children on a regular basis, and that teen curses his father. He should be executed because of that?

First, there is some theology that we need to remember. There is some theological truth that is very different than our usual thinking, so different it seems utterly foreign and hard to swallow, but it is true nonetheless. In Genesis 3 God warned Adam and Eve that the day they chose to disobey him, they would die. Much later, in Romans 6:23 Paul wrote, “The wages of sin is death.” The penalty for sin, every sin, every hint of disobedience to God, is death. We have trouble with this because we don’t realize that when we sin, when we disobey God, even in the slightest, we create evil. We introduce evil into God’s system. Evil is like cancer. It will eventually destroy. This is something I’m very much sensitive to these days. How much cancer is all right in your system? Personally I’m hoping and praying that my immune system, aided by the meds I’ve been receiving, has eliminated every bit of cancer in my body. That’s because even the tiniest bit of it left in the system can lead to the disease roaring back and ending my life. This is also true of evil in God’s system. Even a tiny bit of it will lead eventually to destruction.

Therefore God said the moment we disobey him and thus create evil, we must die. We have become a cancer in the system. The fact that we don’t drop dead the moment we produce even a one celled bit of disobedience to God is nothing but pure grace. It is God allowing us to live when we should by all lights, be dead. Our problem is we get so used to grace we think we deserve it. But you can’t deserve grace. It is only grace when you don’t deserve it, and we don’t. Which means if God says for some sin a person should die, it is not harsh. It is actually what every single one of us deserves every day of our lives. It is what we have earned, and keep earning, day after day. So is the Law of Moses harsh? Not in the least. It is what we deserve.

That’s the theological answer to that question, but there is also a legal answer, one I didn’t know much about until I studied this passage. I read an interesting analysis by a lawyer that shed some light on this issue. There is something about the nature of laws that I was not aware of, that begins to help us understand this. It is that in many cases the penalties for a crime that are stated in a law are actually the maximum penalty that can be levied. They are not the mandatory requirement. This is true even in our laws today. Those maximum penalties are not expected to be used, but they are there as a safeguard. This is true of the Old Testament laws such as this one about adultery. It was never intended that the penalty for adultery would necessarily be death. This was generally understood by Israel, which was why the death penalty was never used in cases of adultery.

How do we know the people understood the death penalty wasn’t to be generally used? I’ll give you an example. You might recall the story of a young couple named Joseph and Mary. They were engaged. In that day, when engaged they were considered to be husband and wife already. It was learned that Mary was pregnant, but she had not slept with Joseph. He knew the facts of life. There’s only one way a woman becomes pregnant. If she didn’t sleep with him, she had slept with another man. There are no other options. Except in that one unique case. He thought she had committed adultery. Matthew 1:19 says, “Because Joseph, her husband, was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.” Joseph was faithful to the law. He wanted to do whatever the law said. But he didn’t even consider putting Mary to death. The consequence he had in mind was a quiet divorce that would not result in public disgrace for her. In his mind, that satisfied the demand of the Law. The death penalty wasn’t even considered because he understood the true intent of the Law. This is why the whole trap set by Jesus’ opponents was so disingenuous and hypocritical. They would have been horrified at stoning a woman for adultery, because they also understood the intent of the Law.

Actually that verse that set the death penalty as the maximum for adultery was intended to limit what might happen. In Genesis 34 Jacob’s daughter, Dinah, was raped by a local named Shechem. His dad was the most powerful man in the area, and Shechem apparently was sort of a spoiled child of privilege who took whatever he wanted. But after he raped Dinah, he still wanted her. Verse 3 says his heart was drawn to her, he loved her, and he wanted to marry her. However, verse 7 says that Dinah’s brothers were shocked and furious. They hatched a scheme. They said they’d agree to the marriage if every man in the town got circumcised. So one day they had a mass circumcision. Verse 25 says, “Three days later, while all of them were still in pain, two of Jacob’s sons, Simeon and Levi, Dinah’s brothers, took their swords and attacked the unsuspecting city, killing every male.” Then they looted the town, carried off all their wealth as well as the women and children of the town.”

The penalty for raping a woman was death. That was supposed to be the maximum. It had to be stated that way, because in those days if you perpetrated a crime against the member of a clan or tribe, your entire clan was in jeopardy, not just you. The Law was intended to limit that kind of excessive revenge.

The second question was, how could Jesus just ignore the Law if he claimed that not a letter of it would pass away before it was fulfilled? What we have just seen gives some of the answer to that question. Jesus also understood that the death penalty was not required, in fact, was never used in such cases. In effect, that woman had already suffered a consequence for her actions. The humiliation and exposure that she had experienced was enough of a consequence.

It is crucial that we recall what John 3:17 said about why Jesus came into the world. “For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.” Jesus was not here to condemn fallen, failing people. Condemning this woman would have accomplished nothing. Jesus’ desire, as that verse said, was to save the woman, to give her hope and a new life. It was precisely because of this that common people who could never live up to the standards of the Pharisees, criminals and traitors like Matthew, prostitutes and others of the underside of society, flocked to Jesus. All those people had known from religion was condemnation. What they got from Jesus was love, acceptance and hope. They got the hope of an entirely new life.

WE MUST RELATE THIS STORY TO OUR LIVES

**We receive from Jesus the same thing that woman did.**

The woman in this story was guilty. Perhaps she could give some excuses or rationalize her actions, but when all is said and done, she was guilty and she knew it. She never protested her innocence because she wasn’t innocent. Yet, when we get to the end of the story we see her speak the only words she uttered in the recorded account of the incident. Everyone has left. There’s no more shouting, no more threats, no more questions. The crowd has dissipated completely. Jesus asks the woman, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” He knows they’re all gone. He knows no one has condemned her. But he wants her to know it. She says, “No one, sir.” No one, Lord. She is no longer condemned. Not by the crowd, and not by Jesus.

A fundamental struggle for every human being is to somehow find freedom from condemnation. We all go through life alternating between insisting that we are fine, sometimes offended because people don’t see how wonderful we are, hurt by the slights life and other people have handed to us, and struggling with a sense of inadequacy and failure to measure up even to our own standards. Psychologists tell us we all carry around bag full of guilt.

For a long time we used my hockey bag as luggage. In case you are not aware of it, when you play hockey you have to wear a lot of equipment. You start with skates, which are fairly large. Any skates are going to be good sized, but hockey skates have to provide some protection for your feet and ankles. Then you have shin pads that cover not just your shins, but the sides of your lower legs and your knees. You have bulky hockey pants that have padding for your thighs, hips and your rear end. On top of that you have shoulder pads that also cover your chest. You need elbow pads, because you’re going to fall, and if you hit your elbow on the ice without padding you’re going to injure it. Then you have bulky gloves to protect your hands from sticks and flying pucks. Finally you have a helmet. To carry all that you have to have a very large, very sturdy bag. So hockey bags are big and bulky.

I tell you that because for a number of years that bag was used for another purpose besides carrying hockey equipment. We used it for taking recreational equipment with us on vacation. It would be full of tennis racquets, tennis shoes, snorkeling gear, tennis balls and other such paraphernalia. It ended up being just as unwieldy and heavy as if it carried hockey equipment. I have memories of being stressed by hauling that thing along with other bags onto shuttle buses, into and around the airport and being almost overwhelmed by it. What a relief it was when I could just drop that bag and be done with it.

For us, we go through life carrying around a heavy bag of not measuring up, of guilt, of feeling unworthy, even deserving of condemnation. We tend to think of God, who sees all our shortcomings, as frowning, unhappy with us, even condemning. What we need to do is think of ourselves in the position of this woman. Jesus asks us, “Does no one condemn you?” And we say, “Well, actually it feels like lots of people kind of are.” But Jesus says, “Well I don’t.” We need to remember what Paul wrote in Romans 8:1. After explaining the astounding grace of God for 7 chapters he said, “There is, therefore, no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” Jesus said he came to bring us rest for our souls. He wants us to be able to put down that hockey bag full of guilt, failure, inadequacy and shortcomings that so weighs us down. He wants us to rest, and until we trust in his grace we will never have rest.

Speaking of that hockey bag reminded me of my days playing hockey. I loved playing, but I just was not very good. I made lots of mistakes, I wasn’t nearly as skilled as I wished I was, and I didn’t think I was much of an asset to my team, other than being a warm body that could kind of skate. A year or so after I stopped playing I was coaching Toby’s high school hockey team. One of my former teammates happened to referee one of our team’s games. When the game was over we got a chance to chat. As we talked he told me he was still playing. Then he actually began trying to recruit me to play for the team he was on. I said, “You must be hard up for people if you want me.” He said, “Not at all, Rick. We could really use a good defenseman like you.” I was surprised that he described me as good. I had no idea that’s how he viewed me. Even then I thought he maybe was just blowing smoke to get me to come play because they were short on guys. I just had a hard time thinking my teammates saw me as an asset. It might have helped if I had known that.

We’re kind of like that. We can’t imagine that Jesus is not condemning of us, disappointed in us. But this incident shows us that he wants us to put our bag down and find rest in him. There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, None. Ever.

**We should give others the same thing we have received.**

A lot of people were looking down on that woman that day. The religious leaders saw her as nothing more than a pawn they could use in the power play against Jesus. She didn’t matter, because, after all, she was an adulterer. She was worthy only of scorn and rejection. They were so much better than her. But Jesus put that situation in a very different light. Those people were judging her, condemning her. Frankly, she had earned it. But what Jesus said opens eyes to the reality of the situation. Only the person who has no sin in his or her life has the right to judge and condemn this woman.

Jesus was saying if you have even a little bit of evil in you, you are not above this woman. You have no right to look down on her. From God’s perspective, you and she are in the same class, for you are equally deserving of God’s condemnation. Therefore what you should have for this woman is compassion, not condemnation.

There are many people whose flaws and failings are obvious to me. What I should have for those people is compassion, love, acceptance and encouragement. . This is how we should see the failing, fallen people around us. We are all going through the same thing, and what they need is the same grace and love that Jesus gives to us. Yesterday our grandson, Wesley, had a swimming lesson at the pool in our neighborhood. I mentioned last week that 2 weeks ago he had a bad lesson. Laurie employed some bribery to motivate him to have a better attitude and last week he had a much better lesson. Then came yesterday’s lesson. This one went so bad that the teacher, who is getting paid for this, suggested to Carissa that at this point they are probably wasting their money. Wesley started melting down before the lesson even started. Carissa pointed out that he had been saying he was eager to go to swim lesson. Through tears he said, “I don’t want to swim. I want to go to bed.” This was at 12:30 in the afternoon. What kid suddenly decides he wants to go to bed in the middle of the day? But that wasn’t the highlight. That came when he was insisting he didn’t want to swim, he wanted to go home. Then he said, “I have to organize my shirts.” He’s 3 years old! Organize his shirts? It was hilarious. Wesley is a charming little guy, but this was quite a performance, and I don’t mean in a good way. But it changes nothing about how his parents and grandparents feel about him. None of us approve of the histrionics he trotted out yesterday, but we all continue to love him and delight in him. That’s what Jesus does with us, and what he wants us to do with others.

Laurie and I were on vacation and were going to eat at Brennecke’s Beach Broiler, a restaurant on the island of Kauai. As we were walking toward the restaurant we noticed a family group ahead of us. There were two grandparents, the parents and a couple of young kids. One of them was a boy around 4 years old. He apparently didn’t want to go to that restaurant. Right at the entrance he balked. As we got closer we watched the situation escalate quickly. He went from resisting going in to a full on meltdown. This tantrum was not just any tantrum. It was galactic. The whole group was brought to a full stop. They were paralyzed, not knowing what to do. There was a time in my life when I might well have been a critical of how the parents were handling that situation. But I’ve found myself in their situation on more than one occasion. I feel the frustration, the helplessness, the embarrassment they were feeling. What I felt for them was sympathy, not judgment, because I’ve been there. That’s how we should view the other flawed, broken humans populating the planet around us. For in truth, we are all in need of grace. What they need is our compassion, just like that poor woman needed the compassion Jesus gave her.

Paul Borthwick, professor at Gordon College, author and counselor, related that he was at the Boston airport 2 weeks after the Boston Marathon bomb attack in 2013. As he waited for his flight at his gate he noticed a young woman who worked at her news stand, standing alone. She wore the hijab head covering of a Muslim woman. He felt the Lord wanted him to speak to her. He said, “As-salaam alaikum” the Arabic greeting meaning “Peace be to you.” She burst into tears. He thought he had somehow done something wrong or offended her, so he quickly apologized and asked what he had done wrong. She said, “No, what you said was perfect. I’m crying because I’ve been standing here 2 weeks since the bombing, and you are the first person who has even spoken a word to me.”

There are people all around us desperately needing grace, forgiveness and God’s love and mercy. We have the huge privilege and opportunity of delivering it to them. If Jesus doesn’t condemn them neither should we. Over the years we’ve had some neighbors that have tested my ability to apply this truth. There was the woman who had an affair and blew up her marriage and her family. There was the woman who was friendly, but if you did some minor thing she didn’t like she acted like it was a major crime. There was the guy with a volatile temper. There was an irrationally crabby old woman who hated kids. There was the invariably cheerful Christian who was a dishonest cheat. There was the know it all guy who made life so miserable for neighbors around him they moved away. How am I to deal with these people? I don’t pretend what they do is fine. But I don’t condemn them. I give them the same grace Jesus extends to me.