



Auckland Unitarian Church

Love beyond belief

Outgrowing the past — a test of character

Clay Nelson © 26 July 2020

Considering the dust-up in Parliament over the bad behaviour of some of its ministers this week, resulting in demotions, firings, and the decision by some not to stand in the next election, it is perhaps not surprising that the story of the [woman caught in adultery from the Gospel of John](#) came to mind.

Before going further, I need to note that New Testament scholars who participated in the Jesus Seminar determined that John's Gospel does not contain a single word Jesus said or one thing he did. It is a theological reflection about Jesus by an early Christian community, not a historical record. And just to make things more complicated, this particular story was not in the original gospel but added later. No one is sure of when or why or by whom.

All the same, I have always been drawn to the story, a very human story. There is one variant to the story. In this version, after Jesus invites those without sin to cast the first stone, one stone whizzes past him, bruising the woman. Jesus, angry, yells, "Stop it Mother!"

When I read the story there is only one word that catches in my throat — it is the word "sin".

After forty years of preaching I have come to view sin as a meaningless term. It has become a form of spiritual spam tossed out for each of us to interpret its meaning. All too often, historically, the institutional church used it to gain power by diminishing our humanity that we might become dependent on the Church. An example is "The Prayer of Humble Access":

We do not presume to come to this thy Table O merciful Lord trusting in our own righteousness, but in thy manifold and great mercies. We be not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy Table. But thou art the same Lord, whose property is always to have mercy: Grant us therefore, gracious Lord, so to eat the Flesh of thy dear Son Jesus Christ, and to drink his Blood, in these holy Mysteries, that we may continually dwell in him, and he in us, that our sinful bodies may be made clean by his Body, and our souls washed through his most precious Blood. Amen.

This form of spiritual bullying is a power grab and it is not exercised only by the Church. Like those eager to stone the woman, all too often we are all too happy to dwell on the frailties and flaws of another, diminishing their inherent worth and dignity. Deciding who is sinful serves the same

purpose as an *ad hominem* attack on our enemies in a time of war. It makes it easier to kill them. Killing is much harder when enemy combatants recognise their shared humanity.

Let's look at the woman's alleged sin for a moment. Adultery is the most frequently mentioned sin in the bible. It made the top ten "thou shalt nots". It is condemned in two out five books in the Torah and is punishable by death. Several prophets go on at length about it. While the law and the prophets warn both men and women against committing it, its definition is more one-sided.

Men did not have to be faithful to one woman. They could have more than one wife ([Deut 21:15](#)), and even for married men, sleeping with unmarried or unbetroth women did not count as adultery ([Exod 22:16-17](#), [Deut 22:28-29](#)). Only men who slept with another man's wife or fiancée could be punished for adultery, along with the woman concerned ([Deut 22:22-26](#)). But a woman had to be faithful to her husband alone and was expected to be a virgin until she married ([Deut 22:13-21](#)). Adultery laws were clearly about preserving patriarchy. Adultery not only threatened the legitimacy of heirs, it challenged the convention that women were under men's authority; so, an adulterous woman was a very dangerous person.

Clearly sin is in the eye of the beholder. When the beholder is the system, an institution or our neighbour and we are the object of condemnation, it is egregious enough. When we accept the condemnation without considering who profits by it, we leave ourselves open to being diminished in our capacity to become fully human.

Since by all appearances we are all human, it is safe to assume we have all made mistakes, have regrets, and failed at one time or another to live up to our own expectations of ourselves. That is not the same as failing to meet the expectations of others. Meeting others' expectations is not what we were born to do. Meeting our own expectations is hard enough without adding those of others to the mix. I submit as exhibit one the high suicide rate amongst gay, lesbian and transgender teens.

The challenge of our mistakes, regrets and failed expectations is not that we have them, it is where they live on. In the past. When we only view ourselves through their lens we do the work of those who would use us to avoid their own flaws and failings. Dwelling on them blinds us to the many times we have met our expectations, sometimes at great sacrifice. Accepting them handicaps us in the present and is a debilitating burden we drag into the future, squelching new possibilities.

To be honest, I don't know for sure why we hang on to the idea that we are miserable sinners, using the past to justify our unworthiness. I have theories, but the answer may differ for each person. I do suspect its roots are in either our nature or nurture or both.

I do know that we need to find the mettle to outgrow our past. To do so is a measure of our character.

The word character is derived from a Greek word meaning an engraved mark, as what an artist might put on their work to denote who made it, or a symbol or imprint on the soul. In the 17th century, the word came to be associated with “the sum of qualities that defines a person”.

The most popular quote related to character during the nineteenth century was Ralph Waldo Emerson’s definition of it as: “Moral order through the medium of individual nature.” This is to say that character has always been about something greater than self and included the self as part of a community. Moral attachment means being committed to a set of higher ideals and to acting and, if need be, sacrificing, for the greater good of one’s community.

Robert Elliott Speer takes Emerson’s maxim to mean:-

“For [someone] to love [themselves] so much that [they] never [think] of [their] neighbours, to blind [their] eyes so completely to consequences that [they] can live for the passing moment,—this is a very easy philosophy, and the man or the woman who is able to practise it will seem, for a while, to live in the sunshine, a fine butterfly, smooth-going life. All this is easier than to say, not, ‘What is my impulse?’ but, ‘What ought I?’ not, ‘What do I like?’ but, ‘What is best for all the world?’ not, ‘What is the easy way?’ but, ‘What is the hard way over which the feet go that carry the burdens of [hu]mankind, that bear the load of the world?’”

Outgrowing our past is changing the focus from ourselves to what is possible for the world. It takes character to do that. It takes character to learn from our mistakes without condemnation. It takes character to challenge the unjust and self-serving expectations of society and its institutions. It takes character to be the unique individual we each are and bring that to bear on the common good. It takes character to become a dangerous person to the *status quo*. Let us stamp the world with our mark, not letting our past impede us, but motivate us.