

“Holding Stones”
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As a kid, when I got angry with my parents or sisters, it never lasted long. A few minutes passed, maybe a quarter of an hour, the fog of anger lifted, apologies were made, and all was forgiven. That might sound nice, but after awhile, this pattern really started to irritate me. Not when I did something wrong, of course. When I was the one who needed to apologize I was only too happy to receive the ready reconciliation of my parents or siblings. I learned early on that there was nothing I could do to remove myself from my parents' love. I learned that, in fact, in those moments when I most feared I had acted unforgivably, those pinnacles of childhood misbehavior which seemed akin to homicide in my young eyes but were probably things like hitting my sister or lying about hitting my sister- in those moments, when my own shadow side was most visible, the love and forgiveness of my parents seemed to come most quickly and unconditionally, and that felt so good. If I could give every child a gift it would be that experience of unconditional love and forgiveness in their ugliest moments. If I could give every person a gift- every husband, wife, partner, friend- every person a gift, it would be that unconditional love and acceptance in their ugliest moments. It feels so good.

BUT, when I was the one who had been wronged, such speedy and heart-warming forgiveness repulsed me. Having gotten in an argument with a member of my family, I would storm to my room to build up a full head of anger. Lying face down on my bed, I rehearsed and relived the injustices I had suffered, reminding myself again and again just why I was angry. I studied my anger, pinpointing its exact cause in the character defects of the hated individual. I defended my anger, marshalling arguments from reason and scripture and law, just in case the matter of Vince v. His Family ever went to trial. Then, somewhere in the midst of my fierce rebuttal of the defense's points the primary defendant would walk into my bedroom and say sorry, and the hard shell I had been constructing around my heart would crack and the prosecution would drop all charges, and everything would be right again.

It was so irritating! So, the next time I stormed up to my room after some fresh offense, I would chastise myself for my previous softness. Inoculating myself against any possible reconciliation. "I am not giving in," I told myself. "I will not let this go; I will not accept their apologies; I will not forgive; I will stay angry!" To forgive seemed so unfair. I had been hurt; I had been wronged; I must receive justice; I must make them feel my pain! To forgive was too easy, to let it slide for the price of an apology, their words for my tears. Where was the justice in that? So, through the years with family and friends, I insisted, "I will stay angry; I will not forgive; I will learn to hold a grudge, and then gradually, and unfortunately, I did. And today's passage is for people like me, a lesson for those of us who find it hard to release our stones.

It's a lesson that I especially like learning through the song we heard for our special music this morning. That song, "Let it Go Down," is by a group called Butterflyfish, which creates progressive Christian children's bluegrass. (It's kind of a niche market.) What I particularly love about Butterflyfish is the way they take difficult theological concepts and create smart, catchy music, the way they are able to make

complicated ideas accessible and even entertaining. Another of their songs seeks to tackle the idea that, while the kingdom of God may not be fully realized, we can participate in its goodness right here and now. The chorus says,
 “We are going to a place where music
 falls and fills up everything.
 Though it might be a long time,
 I know it’s gonna be alright.
 ‘Cause we’ve already started to sing.”

I am amazed at the songs they are able to create, but I suppose that’s what happens when the front man for your children’s bluegrass band is a professor at Harvard Divinity School.

What they do with this morning’s scripture is especially impressive. While it may seem like a simple story, the history of its interpretation suggests this is an extremely complicated passage. Scholars have been arguing about just what it means for two millennia, and they have come to no consensus. They are so confused by what the passage might mean, an entire subset of scholarship has popped up around the question of what Jesus was writing in the sand. One respected scholar insists that he has pinpointed the exact two verses from Exodus that Jesus writes when he kneels down. He even claims to have scientifically proven that these verses were the right number of Hebrew characters for Jesus to have drawn without having to pivot or move. These thinkers look for clues that are not there, look for a code to unlock this story, because it’s a complicated story, right; because its lesson couldn’t be as simple as it seems. Could it?

Even those who actually look to the story for clues about its meaning, seem puzzled. Perhaps that is because many have concentrated more on what the passage does not mean than what it does, drawing their own lines in the sand. The reformer, John Calvin, for instance, denied that this passage makes any statement about the sentence of capital punishment for adultery. If the death penalty for such a crime is abolished, he said, “the door will be thrown open to every kind of treachery.” Sure Jesus lets this woman go, but that doesn’t mean he thinks we shouldn’t stone adulterers. How could you get that? Calvin carefully guards the status quo, focusing on the religious aspects of the story and claiming, “Although Christ remits men’s sins, he does not subvert the social order.” Another commentator, from the 20th Century, does him one better, suggesting, “Here... [in this passage] there is no forgiveness of sin, for the woman expresses neither faith or repentance.” Such interpretations deny the plain sense of the story: that this woman is forgiven and the system of justice under which she is condemned is confronted. In these historical voices, one can hear the refusal to let go, the need for condemnation, for retribution, for justice. In these voices one can hear the stones clenched tightly in fists, still waiting to be thrown. To pardon her would be unfair to her husband, to the other man’s wife, to all the other adulterers who have been stoned. It would be unjust; it’s against the law! It would be cheap grace! To forgive her is simply too easy!

Some contemporary commentators, especially progressive ones, do admit that Jesus forgives the woman, that he shows her grace, but many then flip the passage on its head, making it a story of the condemnation of the woman’s accusers. These non-judgmental congregations drag these scribes and Pharisees into their midst, ready to

stone them for their offenses. This passage, they say, is really about the sin of judgment. “Judge not, lest ye be judged.” In the same way that others make the story about the woman’s sin, they make it about the accuser’s. They find the meaning of the story in the comeuppance dished out to these powerful hypocrites. But I believe the woman is not the only one who leaves that circle forgiven. When Jesus challenges the men to consider their own sin before they throw a stone, their exit is an act of confession and contrition- and as our song suggests, an act of love, letting it flow as they leave their stones behind. Yet, many readers would protest. To forgive them seems so unfair. They are hypocrites, picking on the sins of others while ignoring their own. You can’t think they have really learned their lesson. To let them off the hook just because they drop their stones would be unjust. They were about to kill her, to stone her. That’s attempted murder, or at least assault! They must pay for what they’ve done. To forgive them is just too easy!

Resistance to this story may go all the way back to when it was written. This passage wasn’t even included in the first versions of the Gospel of John; it was only added later. Most stories that were added later are thought to have been written later, but many scholars believe this is actually an ancient saying of Jesus. Why then does it only appear in the Gospel of John and why then only as a later insert? Why were they going to leave it out? Perhaps for the same reason that some have fought so hard to twist and confuse its message; perhaps for the same reason that even those who see forgiveness in it use it to condemn rather than to release; perhaps for the same reason that many write long articles about imagined words in the sand rather than read the words of the story and take them to heart; perhaps for the same reason I sat in my room, stoking the flames of my anger, and trying to hold on. Perhaps the lesson of this story is really not so complicated. Perhaps it is as simple as we first suspect. Perhaps it is merely difficult. Difficult, to accept that God refuses to condemn those whom we condemn. Difficult to accept that God refuses to condemn those who condemn us. Difficult to believe that they are known, and loved, and forgiven; that forgiveness is for the woman, and the crowd, and the confused interpreters, and for us and for “them.” Difficult to believe that God could be so unfair, so unjust; that grace could be so cheap; that forgiveness could be so easy. The history of this story is made up of attempts to escape its radical implications and to domesticate its amazing grace, because it is difficult to let go of that brightly burning anger, to release those solid, hefty stones.

The Catholic theologian Henri Nouwen, tells the story of a woman who was experiencing a psychotic break. Wanting to protect her and all those around her, the doctors at the hospital to which she was taken took everything she had away from her, “But,” he says, “there was one small coin which she gripped in her fist and would not give up...It was as though she would lose her very self along with the coin.” Nouwen says this woman is like many of us when we hold onto our stones. “[We] feel it is safer to cling to a sorry past than to trust in a new future. So [we] fill [our] hands with small, clammy coins which [we] don’t want to surrender. [We] still feel bitter because people weren’t grateful for something [we] gave them: [we] still feel jealous of those who are better paid than [we] are; [we] still want to take revenge on someone who didn’t respect [us]; [we] are still disappointed that [we]’ve received no letter, still angry because someone didn’t smile when [we] walked by...[we] clutch them in [our] hands as if they were treasures [we] don’t want to let go.”

To forgive is a frightening proposition, a vulnerable act. If we forgive them for this pain they have caused, what might they do next time? If we let them go on their merry way, we will only end up back in this circle again. We will only end up hurt again. To forgive seems unfair, seems unjust, seems too easy- and it is. Otherwise it wouldn't be forgiveness; otherwise it wouldn't be mercy. We are never asked to forgive someone who hasn't done anything. Forgiveness only exists in the presence of pain; mercy can only be shown in the face of injustice, because mercy means showing love where love is not deserved. Where love has not been earned...as if it could be. And that makes mercy itself a kind of injustice. Because justice dictates punishment; but mercy chooses love. Justice demands redress; but mercy refuses to condemn; justice stones, but mercy shuffles away one by one, until there is only a sorry pile of rocks. Readers of this story have again and again drawn our eyes toward the stones and away from the empty hands. And the stones are important. They're in the story for a reason. But that reason is not to lessen the love shown, not to qualify it, but to multiply it. It is only in the knowledge of the stones that the empty hands have their power. As the song says, we must hold the stone, feel the weight and wisdom it commands, but then we must let it go, because the weight of the stone is not the point; the weightlessness of the empty hand is the point. Forgiveness is the point. Unconditional love is the point.

In one of my early experiments with staying mad, after I had stormed up to my room, I began to draft a letter to my parents. Rather than rehearsing all the things I wanted to say to them in my head, I put them down on paper, hoping to spur on the conflict, looking for a round two. I was as mean and hateful as a 7 year-old can be, spewing second grade invective, like "I hate you, and I'm running away!" After my parents read my letter they called me downstairs, and I readied for battle. And they told me how hurtful and unkind my words had been, how they had been hoping it was an apology. And the shell around my heart broke open, and I started to cry, and I realized my error, and I said I was sorry, and they forgave me, and we hugged, and it wasn't fair, and it wasn't just, and it was far too easy. And it felt so good.