

SERMON: Sunday – 5 March 2023 – Rev Alistair Cowper

Casting Stones and Lines in the Sand

Isaiah 66:10-14

John 8:1-11

What is it within human nature that makes us want to throw stones at each other?

No easy answers to that one other than to agree that is not how human beings are meant to live. Yet even Jesus said you will hear of wars and rumours of wars but that we were not to be alarmed at that; that such things are the beginning of the birth pangs of something new.

And how wonderful when we see signs of this new kingdom breaking through in the midst of the stone throwing.

For example, I was inspired by a story I read in the news a few weeks ago about a Russian woman who was arrested in Moscow near a statue to a Ukrainian poet. The previously unknown statue has become a memorial to victims of the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

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Apparently there are many of these memorials appearing which the Russian authorities clear away only for them to reappear the next day.

Love never gives up. As Martin Luther King famously put it, the arc of the moral universe is long and it bends toward justice.

Ekaterina Varenik was arrested for silently holding up a sign that said “Ukraine is not our enemy, they are our brothers”.

The court upheld her arrest for “resisting arrest” and her lawyer was quoted as saying, “All the forces of evil were against Ekaterina today”.

Ekaterina is a brave soldier of justice and thankfully isn’t alone. There are many, many other Russians prepared to risk arrest for the sake of peace.

Another woman, Natalia Samsonova, who lost her husband and infant child, went to leave flowers at the makeshift memorial and said:

“I don’t know what else I can do ... I wanted to show that not everyone is indifferent [to the war] and that some people still have a conscience,” she said,

her eyes filling with tears. It was the second time she had returned to place flowers at the memorial.

“This is the least one can do,” she says. “To be a person, to extend your condolences. I fear the longer this goes on, the more people will forget what it means to be a person any more.”

A word and touch of humanity in an inhumane world.

One of the many messages left at the memorial simply says, “Ukraine, we are with you!”.

Its that idea of with-ness that a divided world needs.

Brian D. McLaren has written a book about with-ness. In it he tells a story about a friend who went to a Muslim-majority country specifically to convert Muslims to Christianity. After some time there, he got a sick feeling: he felt he was serving neither God nor the best interests of the people around him, but was instead serving the colonising agenda of the religious clan that sent him. So he changed the direction of his work. He started mobilising Christians and Muslims to work side by side in helping the poor.

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“Something happens,” he said, “when we work together for the poor. We all change. I know that both the Christians and the Muslims feel they are encountering God in one another, and together we are encountering God as we join God in serving the poor.”

He explains that it was through doing things together - what he calls with-ness - lead to this strong sense of peace and harmony.

Bringing together unlikely people to serve and heal together, to liberate the oppressed and their oppressors together, and to model, in their collaboration, the kind of harmony and human-kindness the world so desperately needs. This was the Jesus way to do things.

Brian D. McLaren, *Why Did Jesus, Moses, the Buddha, and Mohammed Cross the Road? Christian Identity in a Multi-Faith World* (New York: Jericho Books, 2012)

People might not still be throwing stones at each other but we're still a long way away from such a world of peace and harmony.

This week I came across this reflection on the stoning of the woman:

[The Line In The Sand](#)

They were ready to stone me.
Why would he want to save me— even if he could?
They had the law on their side.
Why would he break it— even if he dared?
They put to him an impossible question— any answer would catch him out.
Why would he outwit them, even if he knew how?
They used me to bring him down but he brought himself down.
Without a word,
without an answer,
without an escape,
down he stooped on his knees in the dirt, stretching out a hand,
trailing a finger through the dusty sand.
His head bowed,
his back bent,
his arm moving slowly, making lines...
They keep on badgering him, goading him into tripping himself up.
But without a stumble, he stood straight and made clear his line in the sand.
“Stone her then, whoever is without sin.”
Bending down once more, trailing fingers,
eyes lowered,
arm outstretched.
Silence.
Slowly, shuffling footsteps.
Accusers departing.
No-one left to condemn me.
“Go well now,” he said to me, “Be without sin.”
What a way to save a life.

Jesus assures sinners of the possibility of living free from sin and he shows us the way just as he sent the woman on her way with the words go and leave behind your life of sin.

And so we can sing and rejoice in God’s forgiveness. There were no accusers left to condemn the woman. And Jesus wasn’t going to condemn her either.

As Paul’s letter to the Romans declares, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (8:1).

So we have here the simple assurance of forgiveness in the presence of Christ. And the more people know that for themselves the closer we are to a world of peace and harmony.

And as well as this much needed assurance of forgiveness, we also have Jesus giving clear directions to a better way of life for those caught up in finger pointing and blaming.

“Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. Give, and it will be given to you” (Luke 6:37-38).

Jesus provides an ‘off ramp’ for the accusers to take from the highway of hypocrisy they had been travelling upon with righteous relish.

It’s Wisdom de-escalating conflict. And its supremely non violent. No wonder Jesus is called the Prince of Peace. And its the offer of a third way when there appears only to be a choice of two.

The binary choice here would be to the listeners to decide between only two ways - either uphold the Law and have the woman stoned, or deny the Law, and risk expulsion from the religious community.

Jesus doesn’t fall into the trap of forcing people to make that binary choice and end up in the wrong choice.

How wise to turn the accusation back onto the accuser to make them examine their own behaviour instead of ignoring what is inside them and tearing someone else down in order for them to look better in comparison.

Jesus doesn’t play those games.

I’d love to know what he wrote on the ground. What do you think it was?

Maybe he was just thinking how to respond. Counting to ten and taking a breath? Maybe it was what he then went on to say,

Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.

I reckon he was thinking carefully about how to respond. Giving himself time.

That’s very wise.

How often have I felt under the pressure to respond quickly when you’re put on the spot. How often have I felt the need to quickly respond to an email and ended up regretting what I said, especially if its at the end of a busy day. Far better to bide one’s time. Sleep on it and think carefully, prayerfully about how to respond.

I think that’s what Jesus did. And its what we all need to do.

When the crowd comes rushing up to you demanding an answer, insisting that you must decide one way or another; don't fall into the trap of firing back a response unless you're certain its God breathed.

And so he bent down and wrote in the sand.

Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.

And as they all began to walk away, beginning with the oldest, they realised they were all sinners, standing in the presence and need of great mercy.

God, the God of mercy, desires mercy not sacrifice. It's the quickness to forgive that God likes. Not the holding of grudges which can cripple relationships for years and generations.

The quicker we follow in these ways the closer we are to a world of peace and harmony.

And to own up to one's own shortcomings and walk away from finger pointing and blaming others is never easy.

On March 24, 1980, Archbishop Óscar Romero preached a sermon in San Salvador and within a few minutes he was assassinated. He'd become too much of a threat with his words of truth and love and forgiveness. Here are some of those last words:

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“One must not love oneself so much as to avoid getting involved in the risks of life that history demands of us, and that those who try to fend off the danger will lose their lives, while those who out of love for Christ give themselves to the service of others will live, like the grain of wheat that dies, but only apparently. If it did not die, it would remain alone. The harvest comes about only because it dies, allowing itself to be sacrificed in the earth and destroyed. Only by undoing itself does it produce the harvest”.

Living in a conflict zone, where there were lots of stones being thrown, and worse, Romero knew that Jesus words were getting him into trouble. But he was compelled by that love of God and for his fellow San Salvadorans.

As another writer put it,

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Love is the outbound movement that trains people to heal injustice and kindly embrace the world

Norman Wirzba, *Way of Love: Recovering the Heart of Christianity* (New York: HarperOne, 2016)

Love teaches as we allow ourselves to follow and walk away from what we've known before; just as they dropped their stones and walked away; just as when Jesus says to Simon and Andrew, follow me, and be my disciple, learn from me, and they left behind their nets, their previous way of knowing and being in the world, to follow a better way.

Following Jesus, following in the Way of Love, is a daily commitment to be changed by that same love; to not stay the same but to evolve into Christ likeness; something that doesn't happen overnight but over a lifetime.

Yes, I am a new creation. But yes also, I am becoming a new creation by way of the cross, and saving one's life by learning to lose it or give it away; and the more us who choose this way, like Ekaterina did or Natalia or Oscar Romero, just like Jesus, the closer we will be to that world of peace and harmony.