

Journey of Stones: Sticks and Stones

Remember all those silly rhymes we used to say on the playground: some for fun, some for jumping rope, some for those hand jive activities...some to taunt our friends. Let's see if we can remember some of them. Join in if you know it, the louder the better.

- Liar, liar.....pants on fire
- Steve and Maggie sittin' in a tree....K I S S I N G!
- We want a pitcher.....Not a belly itcher
- Step on a crack...break your mother's back.
- Sticks and stones may break my bones...but words can never hurt me.

Most of these playground phrases have at least a little bit of truth to them....except the last one. “Sticks and stones may break my bones...but words can never hurt me.” WE know from our own experience that words, criticisms, can hurt us deeply, especially those said in anger. Yet we tell our children when other kids are being cruel or mean...”Just ignore them.” It is likely we were told that and so we tell our kids and grandkids the same thing.

Don't pay any attention to what other people are saying. Remember, “Sticks and stones may break our bones, but words can never hurt us.” But the truth is, sticks and stones may break our bones, but words can sting like anything. The tongue is the most powerful muscle in the body. It only weighs a quarter pound, but in a single moment it can destroy a person's reputation or demolish their sense of self-worth.

Jesus was teaching early one morning in the synagogue, when the Pharisees brought in a woman who had been caught committing adultery. Imagine that! Right in the middle of worship, and they drag this person into the sanctuary for a trial. Scripture does not say that she is naked, but I suspect that she was, or close to it. Maybe she grabbed a blanket on her way out of her home to wrap around herself. Surely, they did not give her time to get dressed before they hauled her off to be executed.

“Master, this woman...THIS woman...was caught in the act of sleeping with a man who is not her husband. Our Law teaches that a **woman such as this** should be stoned to death. What do you say? “A Woman such as this” they said. “A woman such as this.” Now there is a label that would stick with you. It must have stung as it landed on her ears. But in case she missed that reference, they piled on the evidence. “She is a ...harlot” “She istrash.” “Stone her to death!” they begin to shout.

But there is more than one way to stone someone. You don't need actual stones. She was already dying a slow and painful death...there in the church, in front of her

community, in the presence of Jesus – a teacher in the synagogue! It has been said that religious people are the only army who ever shoot their wounded; that is what is happening here. Two hundred hands picked up their stones of judgment. Two hundred eyes stared at a “woman such as this.” But one pair of eyes refused to stare. Jesus. Jesus looked down at the ground. He began writing in the dirt. He refused to add to the woman's humiliation. Jesus refused to condemn her, even though he was the only one qualified to do so.

“Here is my judgment,” Jesus announced to the self-righteous crowd. “Whoever has never sinned, you may throw the first stone.” “If you are perfect, let them fly!” “If your life is without sin, you can start the stoning.”

It is no accident that the older Pharisees were the first ones to leave. You know, as we age, it seems that we become more aware of our short-comings and more honest about our failures. Pretty soon, even the youngest, most zealous Pharisees dropped their stones at Jesus' feet and left the temple. According to the rules, the woman deserved to die. She was, after all, caught in the very act! But this time...this time...compassion won out. This time love was more powerful than justice.

“Is there no one left to condemn you?” Jesus asked. “No sir,” the woman replied. “Then neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more.”

If this story were told today, I wonder if we would be the Pharisees. Do we try to isolate ourselves from the sinners of this world – the real sinners – with our pious talk and self-righteous attitudes? Would we be the ones with the stones in our hands? Would we aim at those who do not think the way we do, or do not act the way we do, or do not speak the way we do, or do not believe the way we do? You know, the word Pharisee means, “People who have separated themselves.”

Don't we do that? Don't we take pride in the fact that we are not like those who steal – just to eat? We are not like those who are addicted; we are not like those who dress, you know, “that way. We are not like those who are unemployed, homeless, and transient. Aren't we better than them? We don't do things that people such as these do, so we have earned the right to cast stones at them, haven't we?

Well, that is what the Pharisees thought. And Jesus...Jesus thought they were wrong. Now notice – Jesus did NOT say that the sinner was innocent. In fact, he told her to go and sin no more. But, he did imply that she deserved the compassion – not the wrath-- of those who wanted to stone her.

More than two thousand years later we can admit Jesus was right. The woman deserved a second chance. And yet we are so critical of people just like her today: People who break the rules; people who make mistakes; people who do things differently than we do; people who do things differently than the way we did it “when we

were their age.” We can absolve her of her centuries-old indiscretion, but somehow we can't forgive the 21st century sinner. We can forgive the adulterous woman, but we do not forgive an adulterous president, CEO, or TV personality. We resent the actions of the Pharisees in Jesus' day, but we have continued their judgment on others in our day. Loaded with stones, or attitudes, or words, we find ourselves proud to cast the first stone. We have met the Pharisees and they are US!

Years ago, evangelist and pastor Robert Schuller was invited to speak in an African American church in the south as they observed the anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation. When he stood up to preach to a sea of black faces, Schuller was overcome with emotion. Here were the faces of the great-grandchildren of slaves, many of whom had been abused. Though he tried to speak, the words would not come. Schuller spent several minutes in the pulpit weeping. Finally, the host pastor joined Dr. Schuller at the pulpit, he himself now crying as well. The African-American Pastor put his arm around Schuller and said, “Dr. Schuller, in this church, no one weeps alone.”

- That is compassion
- That is tenderness
- That is the Gospel.

Each of you have received a stone; the stones you hold in your hands, whether real or figurative, have already been targeted for someone – consciously or unconsciously. Those of you who have never sinned....you may take your stone home with you. The rest of us are invited to bring them forward and lay them at the foot of the cross. As we lay them at the foot of the cross, we are reminded that we are given a second change.

Let us pray: Merciful God, we have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed. We have failed to be your obedient children. Have mercy on us, O Lord, forgive us our sins and free us to be your disciples. Amen.