

CAN I START AGAIN?

John 7.53-8.11

Can I start again? That is the question we ask today in our Back to the Basics Fall Preaching Series. How would you answer that today? You'd ask in what context?

Well, things at work are pretty rough, I messed up...can I start again? I don't know.

At school, one teacher and I got off on the wrong foot...can I start again? I don't know for sure

I got into trouble with my wife...can I start again? I would hope so.

I said some-thing to one of my friends, I regret it...can I start again? I think so if you're willing to....

My spiritual life is a mess...I feel so distant from God...off track...I know I've disappointed God...can I start again?

I would try not to jump up and down. At some point I would say yes.

Well, if we ask the loveless and lonely woman at the well who had a little chat with Jesus at high noon one day...she would say, "YES, you can start again." She did.

We could ask the Jericho tax-collector, Zaccheaus, who had it all but in mid-life crisis went out on a limb seeking Jesus. He started to give rather than get. His answer, "YES, you can start again."

I think the prodigal son would say yes. You know the one who practically spit in the face of his father, split with the inheritance, squander it, and found himself in slopping hogs. He came to his senses and ended up be served at his father's dining table.

A seminary student came into class. She saw some of her class mates throwing darts. The professor came up to her, gave her a couple of darts, then asked her to think of someone she didn't like or that had wronged her, and go ahead and throw darts at her. She did. The more she threw, the more she enjoyed throwing.

She was thinking, this is great, so and so deserves this. There was that time she embarrassed me in front of my friends. Hey, I got her right on the nose. She promised me she would help with the mission project, that was a joke. And she blabbed something I told her to keep secret. All right!!!

Everyone had a chance to throw and so the prof told them all to sit and then he would read to them from Matthew 7.1-5. First he pulled the picture that they were all throwing

darts at. What they saw were holes in the pictures of themselves taken earlier in the year and a large drawing of Jesus.

You could hear a pin drop. Words plunged into the hearts and minds of the students penetrating them more than their darts did the pictures.

"Don't judge others, or you too will be judged in the same way you judge others." and from the Message he continued, "Don't pick on people, don't jump on their failures, criticize their faults, unless of course you want the same treatment. The critical spirit has a way of boomeranging." He talks about the ugly sneer and the face of contempt and calls it a traveling show mentality, playing holier than thou.

Our student friend felt a wave of shame, guilt, and remorse wash over her. She had in a sense betrayed her Savior. A couple of questions formed in the clanging silence of her mind, "Can I take back the last 10 minutes? Can I start this class time again?"

It's basic to us, to our thinking, to our experience...we can't take it back, but Yes, we can start again.

Paul writes to the Corinthians, "Therefore if anyone is in Christ. They are a new creation. The old is gone, the new has come. OR as Peterson says in the Message, "What we see is that anyone united with the Messiah gets a fresh start, a new life."

Hey, let's see how that question is handled in our story today. It was hard for me to go verse by verse so lets talk about the characters in the story. The Accusers, the Accused, and the Advocate.

We'll start with the ACUSERS.

The Bible tells us that the Pharisees brought a woman to Jesus, a woman caught in the act of adultery.

The Pharisees are those good guys with white hats but black hearts. Giving them the benefit of the doubt we know they are trying to protect the law want people to be obedient to God. But they feel threaten by this radical new teacher, Jesus.

They are mean spirited and cross over the line in cowardice and craze as they bait a woman catching her in the act of adultery. This sting operation is basically to get bigger bait for a bigger fish. That being Jesus.

You see they drag this woman, half dressed, on to the temple steps literally in front of God and everybody else and ask Jesus to rule on her guilt. If he says yes she is guilty it's

ok to stone her...he loses the support of the common people. If he lets her off the hook, he obviously is not a good law abiding citizen.

These men in this story are driven in their own lust for warped justice desperately trying to protect themselves and desperately trying to discredit Jesus without a shred of regard for this woman.

With viciousness they continue to hurl curses and insults of condemnation. Soon those words that bruise cut and tear at the spirit will be stones that bruise, cut, and tear at the body.

Their pointed fingers have the woman and Jesus marked in their sights..but something to think about...
when one points a finger, there are three coming back at you. The boomerang, boomerangs.

The finger of Jesus moves some dust and the words of Jesus change some minds, "He who is without sin cast the first stone." The men drop their rocks and leave. Oh how I wish that the words changed some hearts as well. Oh how I wish some of these men would ask, "Can I start again?" No not start another plan to take Jesus down, but a plan to start thinking differently about life.

And what about the woman, the ACCUSED. At some point we have to make her responsible for her behavior. After all this she broke the covenant with the partner, this may have hurt her family or others. She needs to be accountable. We all do and I would venture to guess that we have all at sometime or other been unfaithful to God or to others, the Bible tells us "we all sin and fall short of the glory of God."

But at some point it is ok to see her as the victim, she is simply a pawn in the paws of the Pharisees.

At camp last week there was a cat and mouse. The cat was playing with the little mouse. In self-righteous arrogance, holier than thou, the cat would sit tall and put his paw on the little mouse or in front of the mouse. The frightened and terrorized mouse would scurry here or there only to have to change directions at the will and whim of the cat as the monstrous paw blocked the his path.

The woman is 1/2 dressed, is embarrassed, exposed, exploited, and powerless, filled with fright and fear overwhelmed by a deep sense of shame and self-condemnation. My sense of her is that life is an on going struggle. She has to feel vulnerable, helpless, and hopeless...And if she asks, "Can I start again."it is in a humiliating whisper.

The Son of God, answers, "Neither do I condemn you, go and sin no more."

In our story it just so happens she has what she needs, an ADVOCATE, one to protect, shield, defend, to cover her, or to speak for her. Guess who?

John tells us as he writes in chapter 2 of his first letter, My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have a mediator and advocate with the Father, who is Jesus Christ the righteous, who is a propitiation for our sin. Propitiation simply means covering.

Paul tells us in the 8th chapter of Romans, "now there is not condemnation in Christ Jesus." the Message says, "There is a new power in operation. The spirit of Christ, like a strong wind has magnificently cleared the air of the low flying black cloud freeing you from a lifetime of brutal tyranny of sin and death."

Jesus came into the world not to condemn but to save. Most of us know John 3.16. Let's say it, "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, Jesus Christ, so that all who believe in him will not perish but have ever lasting life." Do you know what John 3.17 is, "he came in to the world not to condemn but to save." You see God doesn't stand there hands on hips looking for us to sin. God doesn't point the finger and say, "Ah ha, I got ya", when you mess up. God doesn't condemn, God saves. We do enough of that for ourselves and others.

There is a cute little story a friend sent me. Jesus and the Devil were arguing for days about who was better on the computer. God got fed up with this and set up a two hour competition after which God would determine the winner.

So Jesus and Satan sat at the keyboard and typed away. They typed and typed, e-mails, faxes, spreadsheets, labels and cards, charts and graphs, they did it all.

Just before time was up there was a flash of lightening and the power went out. Jesus waited, Satan wailed...Jesus was calm, Satan cursed until the power came back on.

They rebooted their computers. Jesus started printing out his files and Satan just screamed, "Mine are all gone, I've lost everything, it's unfair, he cheated...why does he get to print his work?"

God shrugged and said, "Jesus saves."

Yep Jesus saves and we seek to be saved. Our part in the ACQUITTAL, to ask for forgiveness.

Our sin doesn't go unpunished, it isn't just dismissed. We just don't face the full consequences...Jesus does.

It's our responsibility to ask for and offer forgiveness. "If we confess our sin, God is a just and righteous God, and will not only forgive the sin but cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

It's hard to ask for forgiveness, isn't it. I have my pride, I don't want to admit I'm wrong. It doesn't make me look good. Besides it might get worse before it gets better...the situation might never change.

It's hard to offer forgiveness. We have a strong sense of justice but feel as if we are saying it was ok what the person did to us. I think we learn that somehow. Two boys, Tom and Joe are playing. Tom wrestles Joe's truck from him. What happens... there is shouting, crying, mom shows up, finds out what is wrong, makes Tom give the truck back and say he is sorry, then tells Joe to tell Tom, it's ok. Well it wasn't Ok, was it? Certainly Joe has to offer forgiveness but that does not make it ok whatever Tom did. This is painful business, not just kiss and make up or shake hands and tell each other it's ok.

And then we try to equate forgiveness and trust. We feel as if somehow we need to start where we left off in the relationship. Tell me would you put a pedafile back in a classroom. No, there would certainly have to be a great deal of trust earned. The relationship would start at square one.

Corrie Ten Boom might give us a good example of some of this.

During WWII the Nazis attempted to exterminate a number of outspoken Christians as well as the Jews.

Corrie Ten Boom was one of those Christians. She and her sister were prisoners at Bloemendall.

Her sister died there. She was touring Europe speaking of God's love and forgiveness. At the end of one of her talks a guard from the prison approached her beaming and bowing, "Ah, how good it is to be forgiven, to have my sins washed away." He didn't recognize her but she did him. This was a guard that tortured her and her sister. Angry thoughts boiled in her, she couldn't smile and couldn't take his hand. She breathed a prayer asking God to forgive her. Then with love in her heart, the love of God for this man, she was able to take his hand.

God gives us the strength to forgive and God gives us the ASSURANCE of forgiveness. It's THE CROSS.

The finger of Jesus wrote in the dust, the blood of Jesus covered the cross, the voice of Jesus spoke, "Father forgive them they know not what they do." The writer of Hebrews says, "He endured the suffering and shame for the joy that would be found." That's our assurance, the death of Jesus on the cross that our sin and death died there. In his resurrection we're promised, we can start again.

So the question to you is "Do you want to start again?"

If so here are some steps to starting again.

1-RELAX in God's love-

Breathe deeply and know you are accepted no matter what and in the presence of love.

2-RELAY to God what you need...forgiveness, peace, strength, joy...tell him about your brokenness.

3-RELINQUISH control. Give it up...not give up but give it up to God. It is easy I know for me to say,
difficult to do but it is essential.

4-REPENT-we are responsible for something. Remember Jesus said, "go and sin no more."

Repent isn't just saying we're sorry, it's doing something different.

5-RESULTS-Expect results...be patient, we're in process but expect some change. "He who began a good

work in you will bring it to completion in Christ Jesus."