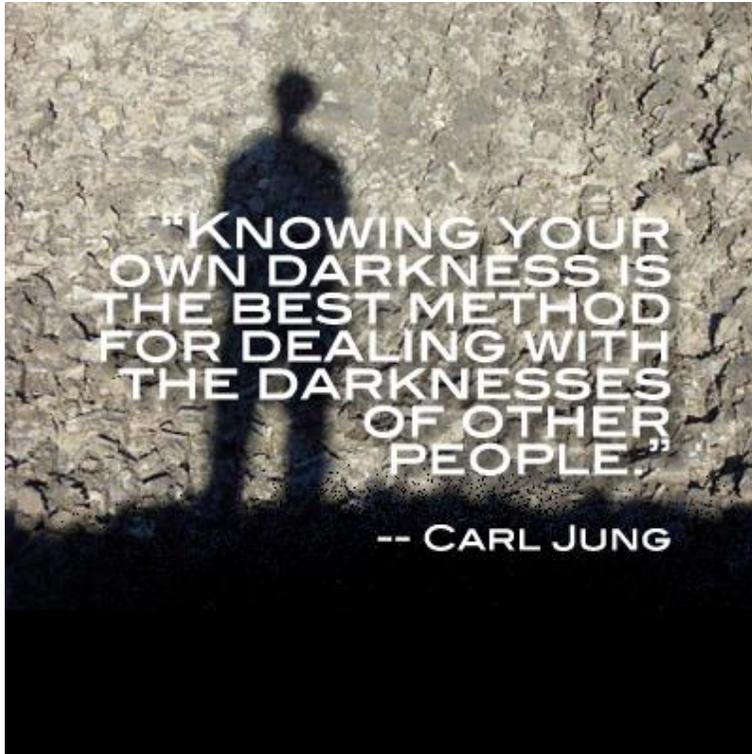


DARKNESS AND LIGHT

A Sermon by Rev. John Weems
March 8, 2015



John 7:53 – 8:1-11

"Then each of them went home, while Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. Early in the morning he came again to the temple. All the people came to him and he sat down and began to teach them. The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery; and making her stand before all of them, they said to him, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground. When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders; and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. Jesus straightened up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" She said, "No one, sir." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again."

THE CHRISTIAN FAITH CAN BE SIMULTANEOUSLY SIMPLE AND SO COMPLICATED.

If we love God with all of our heart and mind and soul and strength, and love our neighbors as ourselves, we are living into the Great Commandment from Jesus.

Jesus, the Light of the World, calls us to be the light as well. (Matt. 5:14)

Why do church people seem to fumble around in the dark so much?

There was once a woman named Gladys in a small church in a small town.

Gladys thought of herself as the social coordinator of the church. Most people thought of her as the gossip and self-appointed moral police. They didn't like how she behaved, but people kept silent to avoid dealing with her toxic wrath.

When a new member named Andy joined, Gladys was quick to render judgment. After seeing Andy's blue truck parked in front of the only bar in town one afternoon, Gladys started telling people that Andy had a drinking problem. She finally confronted Andy, explaining to him that everyone in town would know what he was doing.

Andy was a man of few words. He stood in silence, listening to Gladys judge him based solely on the fact that his blue truck was parked near a bar. He didn't explain or defend himself in any way. Andy figured if Gladys enjoyed spreading rumors, perhaps she would like to be the subject of one.

That night, Andy parked his blue truck in front of Gladys' house. He walked home, and left the truck there all night!

Though we have a faith centered on a baby who grew up to be radically inclusive and battle hypocrisy, well-intentioned people of faith can tend to operate as a club with more judgment than love.

This is not a new phenomenon. In today's Scripture lesson, some religious leaders are trying to set a trap for Jesus. Their bait is a woman caught in the act of adultery. This was and is still very serious business. In addition

the emotional devastation adultery can cause, it impacts practical matters like transfer of property and status in the community. Under Jewish law, this was an offense punishable by death by stoning.

In this church and every other place I've been many are impacted by adultery. Please know that my objective today is not to shame you or open wounds. Some are still in relationships with one who was unfaithful and others have moved on. But we are here together.

Last week's Scripture lesson (Matthew 8:27-38) included a line that doesn't feel good to hear. Jesus called people an "adulterous and sinful generation." He was talking to them and he is talking to us.

We all follow gods instead of God on a daily basis. Even if one's libido is directed in faithful ways, there are countless other status symbols and titles we can lust after. For some of us it's a number or exit strategy from a work situation. For others, it's assuming that your neighbor has their life together, and feeling even worse about yourself because yours feels out of control.

Today's passage is not a get of jail free card to relativize what we want to do. Jesus does say, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone . . ." He does not condemn the woman, but he sends her on her way with clear and seemingly impossible guidance: "Go your way, and from now on do not sin again."

Seriously, Jesus aren't you our friend? Can't we have more of the Jesus who turned water into wine and less of the killjoy?

How do we balance between making Jesus our buddy who endorses our worldly desires? While this passage does not provide diplomatic immunity from sin, it does provide a key to a fulfilling life.

By redirecting people to consider their own flaws before condemning others, he is offering psychologically sound advice.

Psychiatrist Carl Jung, whose thinking continues to influence therapy, 12-step programs, Myers-Briggs Type Indicator personality tests, and more, wrote the quote that is on the cover of today's bulletin in a 1937 letter: "Knowing your own darkness is the best method for dealing with the darkness of other people."¹

Jung knew a thing or two about shadows. He was the son of a Protestant Minister and in a family with eight other ministers. In Jung's view, his father's faith was suffocated by the institution of the church. When Jung was 12, he repeatedly had a vision in which God dropped a massive piece of excrement that crushed the roof of a cathedral. Jung wondered whether he had been condemned by God or what the vision meant. He finally wept "for happiness and gratitude." He never told his father about the vision.²

It isn't surprising that Jung didn't end up becoming a pastor and advocate for organized religion. The institution of the church and church people including yours truly can be too quick to judge the darkness of others, allowing us to avoid facing our own.

Regarding the woman caught in adultery, one author writes that "[Jesus] can handle the situation and the relationship with her because he has nothing to be afraid of in himself."³

Perhaps if we could work toward the ideal of allowing the grace of Christ to guide us in confronting our darkness, we could be the people and the community that God calls us to be.

I know a man named Trey who was born in Boston. His mother was mentally ill, addicted to drugs, and left the family at very young age. Trey grew angry at the world as he struggled to understand why his mom left. "I thought I wasn't good enough to get the love that everyone else was getting," Trey explained.

He started using drugs and alcohol to numb the pain, eventually finding his way to San Francisco. During one particularly rough stretch, Trey went on a weeklong meth bender and ended up in a hospital emergency room. When he reached the Salvation Army's Harbor Light Detoxification Center, Trey felt he had nothing left. Part of his therapy involved confronting his shadow in a 12-step program. At its heart, Trey says, the program focused on "Clean[ing] your mind, to bring[ing] down barriers that keep you from finding God."

¹ C.G. Jung, "Letter of Kendig Cully," 25 September 1937, *Letters*, I, 237.

² C.G. Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, Vintage ed. (New York: Vintage, division of Random House: NY, 39-40), accessed at http://community.beliefnet.com/go/thread/view/43901/20160997/Carl_Jungs_terrible_vision

³ Maria Boulding in Daniel Rees and etc., eds., *Consider Your Call: A Theology of Monastic Life Today*, New ed. (SPCK Publishing, 1980), 426-27.

Calvary member Dick Clark introduced me to Trey at the Salvation Army's homeless outreach program in which volunteers visit people under the freeway and other homeless encampments. We had a chance to share sandwiches, hot cocoa, t-shirts and socks. We were most impressed that Trey knew dozens and dozens of homeless people by name. He knew their story, like the young man who had been abandoned by his family and was trying to earn his G.E.D.

Trey says, "Most of my life has been about me and doing what I need to do and fixing things. This ministry that I have here isn't about that. It's about allowing people to be who they are and showing them compassion and to try[ing] to teach them about Jesus through my words, but primarily through my actions. I don't see Jesus treating people that differently. I see him embracing everyone. When I'm out there, it's not that I'm looking at 'dirty homeless guy,' it's another human being just like me."

After emerging from his own time of darkness, Trey became a ray of light for others because he had been in that place.

Every single one of us has a shadow side or some bitterness that we would rather not acknowledge.

Perhaps a parent or partner or boss or someone who was supposed to be our friend inflicted some of the pain. Someone didn't love us or nurture us the way they should have.

There is a good chance some of our darkness is self-inflicted through life choices.

Jesus does not call us to stay in the darkness.

Let's confront it.

In the very next verse in the Gospel of John after today's passage, Jesus said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life." (John 8:12)

Amen.

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