

BELPRES CHURCH

Sermon Title: Storytellers

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Scripture:

John 8:1-11

¹ but Jesus went to the Mount of Olives.

² At dawn he appeared again in the temple courts, where all the people gathered around him, and he sat down to teach them. ³ The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group ⁴ and said to Jesus, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. ⁵ In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" ⁶ They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him.

But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. ⁷ When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." ⁸ Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground.

⁹ At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. ¹⁰ Jesus straightened up and asked her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?"

¹¹ "No one, sir," she said.

"Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin."

Transcript:

The scripture comes from John chapter eight. At dawn, Jesus appeared again in the temple courts where all the people gathered around him. The teachers of the law and the Pharisees

brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group and said to Jesus, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. In the law, Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now, what do you say?" They were using this question as a trap in order to have a basis for accusing him. But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let anyone of you who was without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." Again, he stooped down and wrote on the ground.

At this, those who heard begin to go away one at a time, the older ones first until only Jesus was left and the woman's still standing there. Jesus straightened up and he asked her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" "No one, sir." She said. "The neither do I condemn you." Jesus replied. Go now and leave your life of sin.

Holy Spirit, teach us what you mean by these words and help us to live by them in the name of Jesus. Amen. A number of years ago I was preaching and I accidentally had a slip of the tongue that meant that I ended up saying something not quite appropriate for church. It wasn't terrible, it just wasn't quite appropriate for church. It was an accident. In the video you can see that when I realized what I said, I hesitate for a moment and I'm trying to decide, okay, do I acknowledge what just came out of my mouth or do I soldier on? Well, I chose to soldier on. The next day, when I came into work, I heard all this laughing coming from the office where our modern worship staff work. They were playing that moment on the video over and over and over again. They'd watch it, they'd laugh, they'd back it up, watch it again. They'd laugh. They thought it was hilarious. None of those people work here anymore.

I didn't fire them. They just don't work here anymore. I know that right now You all are dying to know what I said, right? Uh-huh, I'm not going to tell you. No, you're just going to have to go watch all of my sermons all over again, because if I told you I'd get emails. Plus, it was embarrassing and I don't want to relive it, except I do relive it. I do relive it. Sometimes I remember that moment and I'll cringe and I'll go, "Ugh, I can't believe I said that. That's so embarrassing." Do you ever do that? Are there moments that you think back and you cringe with embarrassment? Do you ever do that or is it just me? Okay, I'm so embarrassed if it's just me. But sometimes what we feel in moments like that is just embarrassment. But other times, we feel something much more destructive about ourselves, shame.

Shame is never from God. Shame that says, I didn't do a bad thing, I am a bad thing. Most of us have some degree of shame in our lives. Some more shame, some less shame. If you don't have any shame at all, you know someone who carries shame in their life. So, listen to this to know how to help them. And some of the shame that we have comes from outside of us. What people have said to us, you're not smart enough, rich enough, athletic enough, thin enough, whatever it is. Some of that shame comes from outside. And some of our shame is internal shame that we feel over things we've done, haven't done are continuing to do. Often, the shame that comes from outside, from others, only has power because it seems to verify the shame that we carry inside.

See, I knew it. They're right. They're right. I'm a bad person, I'm a bad person, I'm a bad person. If we can get rid of the internal shame, the external shame from other people starts to lose some of its power, and that's what Jesus does. What is it in your life that you don't want anybody to know about? What is it in your life that you wouldn't want your friends or spouse or coworkers to know about it? What is it in your life that you wouldn't want your mother to know about, which might be a longer list? Shame is very destructive.

Shame makes us avoid close and deep relationships even with our spouses because we're afraid that they're going to discover our secret. It leads to feeling unloved, even by people who love us because we're haunted by the thought, but if this person who loves me really knew what's going on in here, they would leave me. They wouldn't love me. Shame even makes us not like ourselves, or as Taylor Swift, the fount of so much wisdom these days, the way she so painfully puts it in her new song, "I'll stare directly at the sun, but never in the mirror." That is a line filled with shame. I'd rather go blind than look at myself. For a culture that says that we have gotten rid of the concept of shame as an oppressive, religious holdover. There sure seems to be a lot of shame in a lot of us. Doesn't there?

What's the antidote to shame? Let's start with what it is not. Freedom from shame is not denial, which is our culture's go-to strategy to handle shame. Just deny that I did anything wrong. I didn't screw up. I'm not a sinner. In fact, sin isn't even a thing. Sin is just something that religious people invented to shame us and try to control us. But as I said last week, that dog don't hunt because I think deep down, if we really believe that deep, deep down, we wouldn't be so anxious to prove to everyone that we are good people. And we wouldn't get so defensive when anyone even hints that maybe we're not as good as we think we are. Denying that I've done anything wrong that has hurt other people, it just doesn't work because deep down, I know I am a sinner. Deep down whether I know it in my head or not, deep down, I do know I'm a sinner.

Second thing freedom from shame is not, is getting stuck in it, obsessing over it, constantly feeling guilty over it, just beating ourselves up because of it. See, Satan tells us two lies. One is, you're so good that you don't need God's forgiveness. And the second is you're so bad that you can't get God's forgiveness. And both of those are lies. Denying, getting stuck, that is not freedom from shame. Jesus sets us free from shame. And we see that in this story, familiar to some of you, about a woman who is caught in the act of adultery. Just parenthetically in your Bible, some of you may have a note that says that in the earliest manuscripts of the Gospel of John, this story didn't appear. And in some early manuscripts, his story appears in the Gospel of Luke.

Biblical scholars think this is an eyewitness account of a real historical event that Jesus did. It's just not sure what gospel it goes in, but it really did happen. It shows us how Jesus sets us free from shame. The text says the teacher of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group. This is our worst nightmare. All of our sin, all of our shame exposed to a large group of people, but this is part of how shame works. We

have lots of accusers in our lives, parents, children, bosses, spouses, friends, coworkers, classmates. Our culture accuses us. Social media is a shame factory. As we see everyone living their best life now, comparing it to our life that doesn't seem so good and that brings shame. Why don't I have that life? And heaven help you if you say the wrong thing politically, you will face a tidal wave of condemnation.

None of us want to be publicly judged, but we will gladly publicly eviscerate other people. We are such a judgmental culture, which may be why there's so much shame people have and are carrying. The biggest accuser of all, of course is Satan. His name even means the accuser. And he loves to accuse us and make us feel shame. Then the religious leaders say to Jesus, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. In the law, Moses commanded us to stone such women." Not exactly true, we'll get to that. "Now, what do you say?" Okay, there's a zillion problems here. First, it is true. Old Testament penalty could be pretty harsh. In some ways, to protect people because back then adultery separated husbands and wives. And back then the only way women had to support themselves was through their husbands. So, adultery would leave women and children literally starving.

So, yes, sometimes Old Testament penalties could be harsh, but because of that, Old Testament law also made it almost impossible to execute anybody. What the law actually said is that both the man and the woman have to be punished for adultery because as it turns out, that's not something you can do by yourself. So, where's the guy? Where's the guy? The law also said there had to be two eyewitnesses to the event. Not I saw her coming out of his hotel room. Not I saw them alone together. No, no, no, no, no, no, no. You had to see the deed with your own eyes. Question, how did the religious leaders see that? Were they peeping in her window? Because that's just creepy.

Most likely they set her up with one of their buddies who deliberately commits adultery with her, which is a sin for him too. All because as the text says, they were using this question as a trap in order to have a basis for accusing Jesus to bolster their own power because Jesus was criticizing them. If this woman gets killed in the process, they don't care. Oh, how are these religious leaders sinful? Oh, let us count the ways. They are guilty of conspiracy, entrapment, voyeurism. They didn't bring the man, which means that they're guilty of partiality, which is a major sin in the Bible. This is a sexist, horrifying act on the part of these religious leaders. The trap they set for Jesus is if he says let her go, they'll say, look, look, look, he doesn't uphold the law. But if he says go ahead and punish her, they'll say, look, there's your Messiah. Not very compassionate, is he? Come unto me with all of your problems and I'll have you executed.

But Jesus avoids the trap. Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her. It is brilliant. He upholds the penalty. He upholds the law, but he does so with a condition that makes it impossible for anyone to actually do it. And then it says, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, probably because they'd had more time to rack up more sins. That's just how life works. The more you live, the more you sin. But also, because I

think sometimes it takes us a while to see the damage our sin does. There have been times in my life where I have been doing something that hurts other people all the while saying, "I'm not doing anything wrong. This isn't a sin. I'm not doing anything wrong." Only months and sometimes years later, to see the damage that my behavior really did have on people. What I have learned is that what the Bible calls sin really does hurt other people and hurts me.

So everyone leaves, it says, until only Jesus was left with this woman still standing there, remember that detail? I'll get back to her. And then Jesus says, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" That is such a powerful line. Right now, in this room, Jesus says to you, who condemns you? Who condemns you? "No one" She said. "And then neither do I condemn you. Go now and leave your life of sin." Jesus doesn't say, oh, don't worry about it. This thing you did is not that bad. Don't worry. It's fine. You're good. No, no. He tells her the truth. This is sin, but neither does he condemn her. He offers her grace. This moment takes us all the way back to the very beginning of the Gospel of John where it says that Jesus made his dwelling among us full of grace and truth. Grace and truth in equal measure, not more one than the other, not first one and then the other, equally both, simultaneously. There's no word in English that can capture this. We just don't have a word to get this concept.

So, maybe let's do what the German language does. The great thing about the German language is when you need a word, you just get a bunch of other words and cram them all together. That's what's awesome about German like [foreign language 00:12:51]. It means shield and toad put together, a shield toad. In other words, a turtle. See, it works, right? [inaudible 00:13:02]. [foreign language 00:13:03], it means far from Gnugen. Actually, I don't know what it means. I think it means enjoy driving, something like that. Let's do what the Germans do and we'll just cram these words together. Grace truth. The only grace truth sets us free from shame. Grace on its own won't do it. Truth on its own won't do it. But grace truth sets us free from shame for two reasons.

First, grace truth means that we are fully known and fully loved. See, if I deny my sin, oh, it's not that bad. That does not free me from shame because deep down, I know I've hurt people, whether I even know it in my head or not, deep down I know. As I said last week, talking behind someone's back damages their reputation, which erodes their relationship with others. Saying harsh and hurtful things can wound people for life. Lying manipulates other people. We can't get rid of shame by denial. We only get rid of shame by facing it. It's only when everything is in me, is fully known, all the gunk, all the ugly stuff is fully known, and I am fully loved, that shame goes away. Because it reminds me that even on my worst day, I'm a child of God. At my worst, I am infinitely loved.

The second way grace truth frees us from shame is it gives us the hope of transformation. When Jesus says to her, "Leave your life of sin." He's not judging her. He's offering her a better life. It's giving this woman a vision of a better life that she could have. If all he said was leave your life of sin, truth, but no grace, she would've felt shamed and judged. But if all he said was, I don't

condemn you grace without truth, that's still depressing. She would've been forgiven but not offered the hope of a better life. The problem with denying sin is it says that no change is necessary. The problem with getting stuck in our sin is it says no change is possible. But grace truth, says change is both necessary and possible. Jesus loves you so much just as you are, not as you should be. But he also loves you too much to leave you where he found you.

There have been times where in my marriage, where my wife has pointed out some behavior that I'm doing that is hurtful to her or hurtful to the family. And she said, "This thing you're doing, it's hurting us, but I know that you can be better. I know that you have it in you to live a better life. I've seen it and I need you to be that man. And I believe you can be that man." The message I walk away with when she does that is not condemnation. It's oh, she believes in me. It's truth that feels like grace. And if it doesn't feel like grace, it may be because we did it wrong. Love always seeks the best for the person it loves, which means sometimes we have to correct people. God has to correct us. We get this with raising kids. We know this with raising kids, you have to correct them.

One of the things that I found fascinating about parenting toddlers is you find yourself saying things you would never think that you would ever say before. For instance, one time I remember my wife saying to our son, "Stop putting spaghetti in your sister's nose." And other words you never thought you would string together. Like those words, why would those words ever be strung together? We had to correct him because it's not good for my daughter to have spaghetti in her nose. But it's also not good for my son because it teaches him that he can put spaghetti in people's noses. And over time, that's not going to work for him like on a first date or something like that. So, we have to correct him for his own good. The coach that never corrects the athlete does not love the athlete because they're not helping that athlete become everything they could be.

Freedom from shame happens when we are fully known, flaws and all and still loved and seen for all that we could be. And conviction to live better does not feel like shame. It feels like hope. Jesus gives us grace truth. And oh, by the way, grace truth is how we should be dealing with each other. How do we experience this then? Because there's a lot of Christians walking around, still carrying a lot of shame, including me. How do we experience this? A couple of action steps to experience this grace truth. First, take your shame to Jesus because some of this is supernatural. It's what the Holy Spirit does inside of our hearts. A good way to do it is think of something that you feel shame over. Some event, something you did, something you said, something. Think of some event you feel shame over. And then in prayer, ask the Holy Spirit to guide your imagination and picture Jesus in that scene. What does he say? What does he do?

As an example, there's a man I know about who lives in California who had a lot of insecurities and shame. It was hurting him. It was holding him back, vocationally actually. In counseling one day, he mentioned a memory he had from when he was six years old on the playground and a group of boys had surrounded him and were laughing at him and mocking him because of what

he was wearing. And the counselor said, "Okay, close your eyes and picture Jesus in that scene and let the Holy Spirit guide your imagination. What's Jesus doing?" And this guy said in his mind, he saw Jesus back then pick up six-year-old him and show him off to the boys that were making fun of him. Show him off with pride, which turned a core memory of shame into a memory of how proud Jesus is of him. Take your shame to Jesus.

Second, tell your story. Tell your story to Jesus and then tell your story, tell your shame. Tell your shame to people that you can trust. Not everybody, people you can trust. At some point, the woman in this text told her story because I mentioned earlier at the end, it's just her and Jesus alone. So, how would we know what Jesus said to her unless she told her story, which would've involved her having to confess her sin, what she did? And the reason she was able to do that freely is because of Jesus. Adultery is a serious sin. It shatters families, it destroys trust, it wounds people deeply. Back then, the punishment for it was death. And Jesus does not suspend that punishment.

It's just that he will take it himself. He'll be put to death to pay the price for her sin and my sin and your sin so that we can go free. And when you know that if you take your sin to Jesus, what you will be met with is forgiveness and grace, it frees you to be honest with him, and then honest with other people. When we start being honest with other people, we are set free from shame because shame dies in the light. Shame dies in the light because it erases the thought, if they only knew they'd leave me, because now someone knows and you're still loved.

A man I know sent me an email a while ago, and he said in his email that the phrase, if they only knew they'd leave me, summed up his life. Part of that was because he had an addiction to pornography. And he said, "I felt certain that if anyone knew this about me, they'd reject me. They wouldn't love me. They'd walk away." And he said, "I would try to justify it. He'd think in his mind, oh, everyone does it. It's not that bad. It'll go away when I get married." But he said, "Deep down, I knew I was hurting myself because I was training myself to avoid intimacy. I knew I was hurting my future wife, my future family, and I knew it involved me in the exploitation of the people I was looking at." Well, he ended up getting caught looking at it at work, and that was a wake-up call for him. So, he started doing addiction, recovery treatment. And one of the things he learned in recovery treatment is that a lot of times what drives addiction is actually shame. People feel shame.

So, they turn to the addiction to numb the pain they feel of the shame. But that, of course, the addiction just makes them feel more shame and it's a cycle. That was helpful to him. But he said what really healed him of the shame and the addiction was he said, "I finally got honest with Jesus." He said, "I went to church. I prayed the prayers, but it was all head stuff, not heart stuff. And being honest with Jesus about all this stuff would mean I'd have to face the question, can Jesus forgive someone like me?"

He said, "I knew theologically the answer was yes, but I needed to experience it. So, I just got real with Jesus. I just started being honest that, hey Jesus, here's what I'm feeling. Here's what I want to do right now. Here's the temptation I'm feeling in my heart. I just got really honest with Jesus. And the more I did that, the more I felt his love. Sometimes it was even a physical sensation. I felt his love so strongly. And at the same time, I also heard him saying, I've got a better way to live. I've got a better way to live and I'll help you do it."

Not first one and then the other, both at the same time. Truth that felt like grace. Over time, the addiction went away. Over time, the shame was gone. So much so that now he'll tell his story to anybody that will listen. The internal shame was healed, which meant what other people think of him, the outside shame lost a lot of its power because the internal shame was gone. He brought his shame to Jesus, experienced Jesus' love and hope of transformation and has set him free from shame and set him free from addiction.

So, what's your story? Your story will be different than his story, but what's your place of shame? Jesus says, who condemns you? Who condemns you? Not Jesus. His grace and truth makes all things new, including you. Yeah, but pastor, you don't know what I've done. No, including you. But pastor, there was this one time when I... No, including you. Yeah, but pastor... Stop arguing with your pastor, including you. Jesus says, "I know. I know the enemy is accusing you of many things, but I silence the enemy. And in my presence, there is no shame." So, what is that place of shame for you? That place you don't want anyone to know about? Not the fake Christian, churchy, churchy place. Oh, look at my victorious lifestyle, hashtag blessed place. Not that place. The place you don't like to think about the place you try to hide. The place you don't want to talk about.

What is that place for you? Because when Jesus enters that place, that place has no power. That place can't defeat you. That place doesn't define you. That place can't control you. That place doesn't have an ice cubes long-term chance in hell when that place comes up against the love and the power and the grace and the truth of Jesus. So, check your shame at the door. It ain't welcome anymore. Jesus is here. And Jesus is that place where shame comes to die.

Jesus, thank you so much that you heal us of shame. And Lord, we bring you all of our shame, whether it's external, internal, we bring it to you and we put it at the foot of your cross. We say, Jesus, heal us. Jesus, make us free. Jesus set us free from shame because only you can. Only you can. So, Lord, here we are, as we are, heal us and we'll be healed. In your name, Jesus. Amen.

Discussion Questions:

Read this week's scripture(s) & answer the below questions with your friends, family, or All In small group.

Opening Question: Looking back, were you able to apply any of the things we talked about last time to your life this week? What did you do? How did it go?

Scripture Reflection Questions: Read this week's scripture together and discuss the following:

- What do we learn about God (e.g., traits, personality, what matters, priorities) in this passage?
- What do we learn about people, and ourselves in particular, this week?

Sermon Reflection Questions: Reflecting on this week's sermon, discuss the following:

- Why do you think Jesus wrote on the ground?
- What was Jesus' message when he said "neither do I condemn you. Go now and leave your life of sin."? Acquittal: The charges have been dropped. Warning: I'll let you off this time, but don't do it again? Or is it something entirely different? If so, what?
- In what ways has Jesus freed you from shame?

Closing Question and Application: Given what we've discussed together today, how might God want you to apply these learnings to your life or in the life of your community this next week? Who might you share this with?

Closing group prayer: Spend a few minutes together in your group sharing prayer requests and then praying together for each other. Thank God for the time together, the conversation shared, the other people in the group, and for encouragement in the week ahead.