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Acceptance

When I moved to Crawley on 1st January 1990, I knew no-one. I came to CBC because I was attending a Baptist Church in Slough and the minister there contacted the minister here – Steve Hembury. Two guys in the church (Sean and Keith) offered me a room in their house as a place to live... and CBC became my church.

I love to play football and I wanted to find a football team to join. A colleague at the school where I was teaching knew the manager of a team and got me invited to a training session. I turned up that first Wednesday evening to a training session for Thomas Bennett F.C. knowing no-one.

I walked into the gym and introduced myself. Before I knew what was happening, the manager stopped the session and spoke to the players: “This is Ian, just moved to Crawley and he’s played some class football!” I thought... ‘What? Class football?’ The guys in the gym that Wednesday evening had a choice: would they accept me into their group, or would they, in some way, reject me.

I played for Thomas Bennett for eight seasons and in that time won every trophy in local football at least once, along with both player’s player of the year and manager’s player of the year. I won those trophies and stayed with that club, the only club I played for in Crawley, for one simple reason: from the first moment I joined the first training session, those players accepted me into their group. They didn’t have to do that, but they chose to. And here’s a truth: by joining their club, I was immediately a threat to them – because if I was picked for the team, one of them wasn’t!

It turned out, I was very different from the rest of the group. Most of them were, in one way or another, in the building trade – I was a teacher. Most of them had grown up in Crawley and knew each other at school. I was new to Crawley. I went to church and wouldn’t play on a Sunday – they were always trying to persuade me to join their Sunday League games.

Over the years, they mocked me mercilessly because I was different. They would joke that I couldn’t pay my subs because I had to pay for repairs to the church bells!! They would always rib me about being a teacher who was

always on holiday, and when I became a minister it simply gave them more ammunition for their jokes. But they accepted me and wanted me on the team! A couple of them came to my ordination. A couple of them have asked me to take a funeral for a family member. They didn't understand me, but I was accepted into the group. In some ways, perhaps, joining and being accepted into Thomas Bennet FC, was, for me at the time, a life-saver.

Acceptance is a very powerful thing. Paul exhorts us to 'accept one another,' as Christ has accepted us (Romans 15 v 7.) To accept people is to be 'for' them. It means to continue to want the best for them no matter what they do.

One day a woman has a very challenging encounter with Jesus, but learns something of true acceptance.

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. (John 8 v 2-11)

Here is a story about a woman who is struggling, some men who have forgotten they are in the acceptance business, and one who is a life saver. Life, for the woman in this story has gone wrong and probably not the way she planned. There is lots we don't know about her, or her marriage, and we can, if we want to, make assumptions which may be unfair.

What we do know is that, for reasons we don't know, she has made a choice. Somewhere along the line she has made a choice to cross a line from which there is no going back – to give her attention to another man.

Perhaps, for a while, she is able to keep her double life a secret, and as long as nobody finds out what she's doing, she can continue that way. Perhaps she even managed to persuade herself that it was ok. But in one terrifying moment, it all comes crashing down. Suddenly she wishes she could change everything, to go back, to undo what she's done. Suddenly she is confronted with the consequences of not just one, but a thousand small choices that have led to this moment and the place she finds herself.

Truth is, she did choose. But, remember, there's lots we don't know about her: we know nothing of her life and circumstances; her marriage or her relationship. On this night though, the men watching her catch her in the act of adultery and take her to Jesus. Their intention is clear – they want her punished. They are willing to publicly humiliate this woman, not just to set her straight.

To accuse someone of adultery, the law was quite clear – they had to be caught in the act by two or three witnesses. Which raises some interesting questions: was this simply a chance capture, or had they been watching and waiting for a while? And this poor woman, however guilty she was, seems to be a pawn in their game to trap and catch, not her, but Jesus. According to the law, the man involved should be stoned too, but he appears to be completely absent. Some scholars have suggested the whole thing was a set-up by the religious leaders to catch Jesus, so they simply let the man go.

They present the woman before Jesus: “She has been caught in adultery, the law is clear, what do you say? Should we stone her?” The trap is that, if Jesus shows mercy, he's soft on the law, but if he says ‘stone her’ the people won't like it, and the Romans will consider it a breach of their peace laws and a challenge to their authority, being the ones who mete out justice. Either way Jesus loses.

Let's pause here for just a moment and reflect on a very challenging question: have you ever held a stone in your hand? How are you doing in the realms of judging others? What do you hold in your heart towards those with whom, perhaps, you don't agree?

Some sins are obvious and we know about them. Some sins are secret and we may never even know we're guilty of them: a judgemental spirit; a superior attitude; impatient words; bitter resentments; little love for others.

These religious leaders perhaps began with soft and warm hearts for God and others. Perhaps they'd even say love was what motivated all they did. But, maybe, over time, something changed and they became proud of their knowledge and lifestyle and just a little less loving towards others. Perhaps they got caught up in their own self-righteousness and their hearts became hard and cold. Perhaps that can happen to us too – and we don't even notice it happening.

I'm not sure that 'the church' has a particularly good history with stone throwers. It seems to me, 'the church' is struggling in these days with stone throwers. I wonder how true it might be for Crawley Baptist Church? I wonder how many of us have stones in our hands?

Church, as far as I understand it, and Crawley Baptist Church, are intended to be places people find life, or is that just my thinking? Our Vision Statement is that this church, CBC, will love without limit. I wonder how well we'll do that, if in fact, we are holding stones in our hands?

Philip Yancey begins his book "What's so amazing about Grace?" with this true story.

"A prostitute came to me in wretched straits, homeless, sick, unable to buy food for her two-year old daughter. Through sobs and tears, she told me that she had been renting out her daughter – two years old – to men interested in kinky sex. She made more renting out her daughter for an hour than she could earn on her own in a night. She had to do it, she said, to support her own drug habit. I could hardly hear this sordid story.

At last I asked if she had ever thought of going to a church for help. I will never forget the look of pure, naïve shock that crossed her face. "Church!" she cried, "Why would I ever go there? I was actually feeling terrible about myself. They'd just make me feel worse!"¹

In Jesus' day people flocked to him – all the wrong kinds of people. I wonder what CBC might look like if we were able to put down our stones?

¹ Yancey, P., "What's So Amazing About Grace?" Zondervan 1997 p 11.

The religious leaders wait for his answer while the woman trembles in fear. Jesus, curiously, writes in the sand rather than speaks. In truth we have no idea why Jesus writes in the sand, or what he writes. The religious leaders push him for an answer, but they are not ready for what they hear.

In those days the law tended to be laxer for men than for women. Commentators suggest that for men it was much easier to have an affair and not be called out. So, when Jesus says: “He who is without sin, throw the first stone,” Jesus is challenging them to the core. The law is clear: those who accuse, must not be guilty of this particular sin. Perhaps Jesus calls out their double standards.

The most respected members of the community were the oldest – and when they begin to drop their stones, others follow. Perhaps, what Jesus is really saying is that those who pass judgement on others, bring judgement on themselves.

How are you doing? Are there stones you would do well to put down?

Jesus asks the woman where the stone throwers are: “Has no-one condemned you?” “No-one sir,” she replies. “Then neither do I,” Jesus tells her. Paul reminds us there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (Romans 8 v 1). God does not, and will not, condemn you, whatever you have done! God is for us and if God is for us, then who can be against us? (Romans 8 v 31) God is for you and he knows the truth!

Are there stones you would do well to put down?

Jesus has a final thing to say to the woman. He tells her to “Go, and sin no more!” Jesus fully accepts her, but does not want her to live with sin. Sin is always destructive. It is possible to accept others fully and challenge sin. Accepting a person does not mean simply tolerating what is not right. Jesus accepted this woman and forgave her sin – you can’t offer acceptance and withhold forgiveness.

Jesus acceptance is free, undeserved, unmerited but demanding. For the woman to fully embrace the acceptance Jesus offers, she will need to make a change. She will need to embrace a new life. One commentator notes that radical acceptance does what condemnation and judgementalism and self-superiority could not do – produce a changed life.

What if, CBC were to adopt the way Jesus offered acceptance? What kind of community would we be? What if we became people who stopped treating people with contempt, or attacking their worth? What if we were those who refused to pick up stones? Maybe then we would be those, like Jesus, who love without limit!

Preached and livestreamed on Sunday 6th November 2022, by Rev. Ian Phillips.