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Love lifts above all judgement

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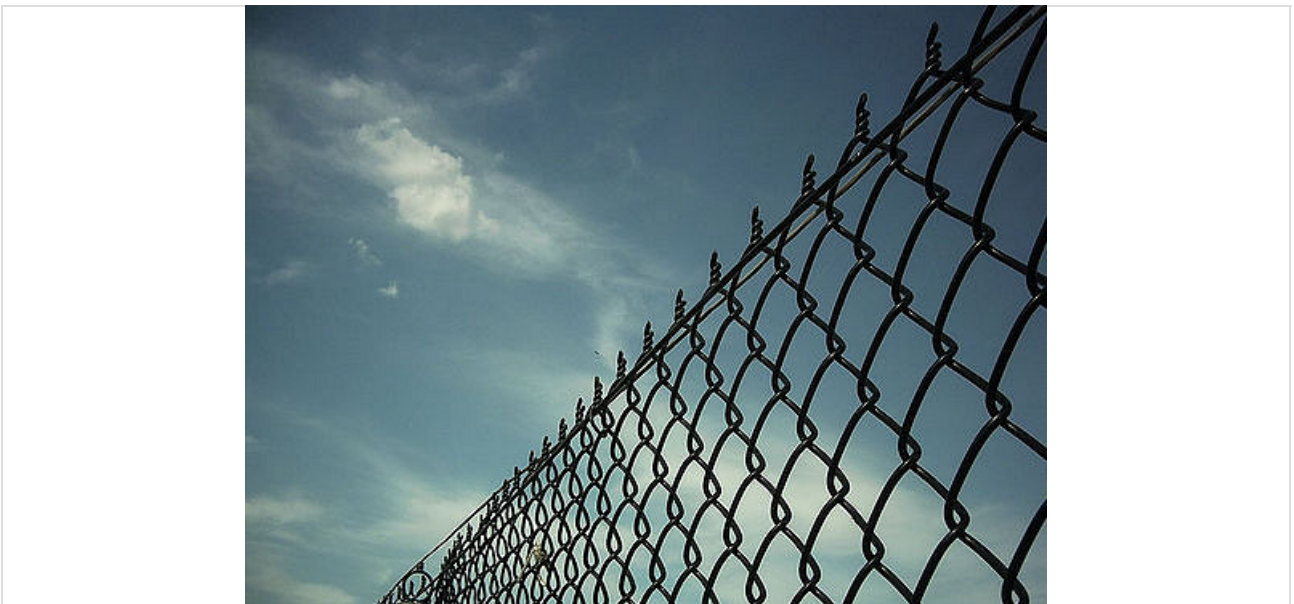
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Love Lifts Above All Judgement

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A sermon by Kelsey Lyon

As I walked through the prison, I saw men move about the halls and looking at me with curiosity and I tried to look back with love, but an overwhelming sense of curiosity was underlying every thought I had. My purpose in the prison was as a worker helping to give a church service with a chaplain and some of the prisoners would soon find that out and their curiosity would be satisfied, but I knew that I couldn't have my curiosity satisfied. I wanted to know their background stories. What had they done to end up in prison? Had they hurt someone? Had they been caught with drugs? Had they stolen something? I wanted to know how I should be understanding the people I saw before me. How I should be judging them? The justice system had deemed their act worthy of life in prison. These thoughts swirled around my head as we set up the church service in the prison chapel.

The men filtered in and sat on the benches in front of me and the chaplain. The chaplain invited me to follow. [Follow](#) ...

to all move a little closer, which they all did except for one man. He sat at the back of the service with tears in his eyes looking terrified and unsure. What was making him especially upset today? Had he been harmed? Was he new to the system? Did he receive bad news? Did he feel alone or angry? Was he condemning himself? What had this man done to land himself in prison? There were so many possibilities in my mind as to why he sat sullenly in the back of the room.

At the end of the service, he waited around while the other men filed out. He finally walked up nervously to me to tell me his story. He was newish to prison and his girlfriend outside of prison had just called him to say that she wouldn't be calling him anymore because she couldn't be in a relationship with someone in prison. His family had also stopped contacting him. He felt alone and judged. No one wanted to be associated with a criminal. He had disappointed them and it was too much of a burden to try to maintain a relationship with him while he was in jail. It felt as though the judgement of others and himself swirled around his head taking his sense of goodness to an unforgivable depth. My heart reached out to him trying to figure out how I could help ease the pain.

As he spoke, I was reminded of the story of the adulterous woman and the judgement she faced. She had just been caught in the act of adultery, which was considered one of the most heinous crimes a woman could commit. The judgment of such an act would have been swift and harsh. I'm sure we've all been there to a small degree. We acted in a way that was counter to what we deem right or what the world deems right and then we had to face not only our own judgment but the judgment of others. Luckily for most of us, our mistakes do not lead to such harsh persecution. Her punishment seemed inevitable. The law that was given by Moses said that she was to be stoned to death. Can you imagine what she would have been thinking the day that the people came to condemn her? Did fear of death overwhelm her thinking? Or did she feel embarrassed to know that she would leave the world with this as her legacy? Or was she more focused on her own behavior, thinking only of her own actions?

I believe that self-judgment can hurt even more than anyone else's because there is no relief from it. It plays over and over in your mind, going over what you did wrong, why you did it, and wishing you had a chance to do it over. You often accept the punishment of your own mind because it seems so justified. At times, it can feel like the only way to move forward is receive some version of karma, to get what's coming to you so that the debt can be settled and you can move forward. At other times, you feel so remorseful for your wrong and you fear the judgement of others. People can seem extremely cruel and unforgiving.

Let's now consider the perspective of the people who took the adulterous woman to be punished.

Their motives appear to be twofold. First, they judged that a woman had acted against the law.

Perhaps they saw it as their duty to uphold the law. It appears that they felt very justified in their position. The woman had done wrong and they were the ones upholding peace and order by making sure that she got what she deserved. How often have we felt this way? We see that someone is acting against a principle that we hold dear and we're furious that they are not upholding it. Our feelings appear so justified. While, we may not wish death upon someone who disobeys our sense of right, we may feel as though something should be done to reign in their behavior.

The second intention behind the people's actions was to tempt Jesus. In their view, he had been acting above Moses's law. The law was central to their culture and way of life. To disobey it would mean that you were disobeying God's commands. They would trap him by either making him say something counter to the law by telling them not to stone the woman or he would have to agree to the law and act counter to his message of healing.

They placed the adulterous woman before Jesus and let him know what she has done and what the law commands as her punishment and asked him what he had to say about the subject. He did not answer their words of entrapment. Everyone waited and then pressed further. Finally, came the reply, "He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her" (John 8:7). There was silence. There was consideration of his words. The crowd back away one by one. Perhaps they recognized

that Jesus had outwitted them. Or perhaps their thoughts had softened with the recognition that everyone of them had faltered and disobeyed the law of God at some point. Soon all the hatred and judgment that had surrounded the woman moved out of the way to make way for the declaration that she was not condemned and then was commanded to live her life without further sin.

In just a few words, Jesus negated the judgement of the Hebrew world. He proved people's harsh thoughts and judgements to be of no value and certainly not just. The Bible declares that, "God is love" (1 John 4:16). A God of love does not wish suffering and punishment upon us; that's human logic. Love lifts us above all condemnation. Divine justice's decree was not just not to kill the woman but to lift her out of her sense of sin. She was given a new freedom that only comes with an understanding and appreciation for God's love. Jesus told her to go and sin no more. Sin is lessened, not through fear punishment, but through connecting to God's goodness so that sin becomes less attractive and goodness becomes our attraction. Jesus gave her this higher understanding of life when he didn't condemn her and instead showed her a love that was more powerful than anything she had felt before.

I love thinking about how the crowd could have brought the adulterous woman to any other person in the world at that time and they would have condemned her to death, but they literally brought her to the one person who would uplift and heal her.

So what does this mean for the man in prison? The world had judged him a sinner, unworthy of love. I had judged him or at least wondered how I should judge him. The justice system decided that prison was his due punishment. His friends and family determined that he was unworthy of their time and affection. But just as the people's judgment had led the adulterous woman directly to Jesus, this man was led into the Christian service. The cruel and often unforgiving nature of judgement had led him to seek an alternative sense of peace and love that wasn't founded on the affections of others. It turned him to seek the healing love of Christ.

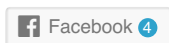
Our judgement and the judgement of others often feels as though it leads us away from the love that unites us as the beloved children of God. But we must remember that we can expect to be brought to Christ to be uplifted and reformed. Christ is waiting for us, calling to us, pulling us under the arms of a transformative love. We can know that as we get more familiar with the love of God, we will be healed of our sins and judgements. We are not bound to what the world deems righteous judgement, but can gain clearer views of a love that is universal and unconditional, a love that redeems and saves. Jesus was so tied to this love that it impelled his every action and he held the world in its embrace. Let's feel that love and let it raise us above the world's judgement.

"My little children, let us not love in word, neither in tongue; but in deed and in truth. And hereby we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before him. For if our heart condemn us, God is greater than our heart, and knoweth all things" (1 John 3:18-20).



Kelsey moved to Boston from California where she grew up. She loves being outside and is looking forward to exploring winter activities in Boston. She is studying at BUSTH in hopes of becoming a military chaplain.

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