

Dust (Chap 12, Searching for Sunday) – Joel 2:1-2,12-13, John 8:2-11

I caught up with an old school friend this week and we were talking about the nature of the conservative Christian world we had grown up in, how those who ‘sinned’ or who were identified as ‘sinners’, were to be shunned, and how this system – this sin-sorting system - had been challenged over the years, as we’d had children, as they and we had wrestled with different issues, as they had found partners, or as friends and family had gone through divorce. And she said to me, *“So much of the way the church has responded to people going through real stuff has caused so much harm, and yet Jesus himself ate with tax collectors and prostitutes.”*

And I caught myself thinking, *“I don’t know if people would appreciate being labelled tax collectors and prostitutes. They’re not that bad!”*

But that is the real challenge of what Jesus was doing. He wasn’t labelling these people as so bad that he couldn’t associate with them. He wasn’t eating with them as a concession. And he wasn’t grading sin like I was doing. He was simply eating with them, spending time with them, enjoying time with them even, treating these people – as people.

In chapter 12 of *Searching for Sunday*, the chapter entitled Dust, Rachel Held Evans writes, *“They were the people the religious loved to hate, for they provided a convenient mechanism for externalizing sin as something that exists **out there**, among **other** people.... It’s the oldest religious shortcut in the book: the easiest way to make oneself righteous is to make someone else a sinner.”*

And it’s a shortcut that persists! Les Stein was telling me on Friday that his parents told him never to marry a Catholic, follow rugby league or vote Labor. Happily, he said, he had done all three!

In the previous chapter of *Searching for Sunday*, chapter 11, Evans describes her and her husband’s experience of leaving the church, of falling foul of the sin-sorting system. *“Behind the starched smiles and polite questions [of people she used to go to church with] I saw the same prejudices I’d once nursed against the unchurched, people I’d assumed were too lazy, preoccupied, and self-centred to bother with God.”*

“But what,” she goes on to say, *“about the young woman who left church because it protected her abusive husband and blamed her for their divorce?Should she be blamed for needing some time to recover from her experience? What about the family that left because their autistic child struggled with sensory overload during worship?What about...the couple who were told by their pastor their faulty parenting had made their kid gay, or the sceptic whose questions were met with platitudes, or the woman whose battle with depression just makes it too hard to get out of bed? The*

last thing these people need is one more person calling them failures, one more person piling on the guilt and shame.”

But the sin-sorting doesn't only go one way!

“Conversely,” Evans writes, “I noticed an assumption among many of the unchurched that those who remain in the pews do so as unthinking, uncritical drones just going through the motions...” And, with humour and self-reflection, she describes the following exchange when she and husband, Dan, started checking out churches again.

“What’d you think?” Dan asked [as we got into the car].

“I wonder if they realise their worship songs include both millennial and premillennial theology.... [And what’s this business] about Moses writing Numbers? I mean, everyone knows Moses didn’t actually write the book of Numbers.... [It’s] a combination of written and oral tradition and was assembled and edited by Jewish priests sometime during the postexilic period as an exercise in national self-definition... And while we’re at it, a bit more Christology applied to the Old Testament text would be nice.”

“Um, Rach, the sermon today was about humility,”

Lord, have mercy.”

People’s reasons, Evans writes, *“for staying, leaving and returning to church are as complex and layered as we are.... How easy to judge when we don’t know all the details. How easy to offer advice when what is needed is empathy. How easy to forget that, in the words of novelist Zadie Smith, ‘every person is a world’.”*

In our gospel reading for today Jesus is teaching in the temple and the religious leaders bring to him a woman who, it says, *“had been caught in adultery.”* (Now, as far as I know it takes two to tango. In other words, it takes two to *adulter* – if that was a word - but here there is only the woman. In the sin-sorting system it seems, it is easier to prosecute the less powerful.)

“Teacher,” they say, *“this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery.”* (*“The very act!”* Again, I ask you, by herself?) *“In the law Moses commanded us to stone such women.”* (Actually Leviticus 20:10 and Deuteronomy 22:22-24 prescribe the death penalty for both parties.)

But this was entirely a test. It was a test to see if Jesus, with all his compassion towards sinners, could be tricked into being soft on sin. So, they picked, in Evans’ words, *“a clear-cut transgression with clear-cut consequences and passed around the stones.”*

But in response Jesus does something rather strange. He bends down and starts to write with his finger in the dust.

What was he writing? The text doesn't say. Some have suggested he was writing those verses from Leviticus 20 or Deuteronomy 22, indicating she shouldn't be here without her equally, guilty partner. Others believe he was writing a list of the sins of her accusers. Or that he was writing down their names, a reference to Jeremiah 17:13, which says, *"Those who turn away from you will be written in the dust..."* And others believe it was a way of de-escalating that conflict moment and then revealing that the religious leaders' test did not deserve a direct answer.

Whatever he wrote, the words that he then spoke reveal his message and his mercy, *"Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her."*

And then he returned to writing in the dust.

One by one, we're told, with the oldest leaving first, the group slipped away, and Jesus was left alone with the woman who is spoken to for the first time, *"Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?"*

"No, Lord, no one."

"Then, neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more."

As nowadays Christians we can be very smug about the legalism of the religious leaders of Jesus' day, their pride, and the lengths they go to, to protect their power. We can even be smug about the world some of us grew up in with its prohibitions about smoking and drinking and dancing and marrying Catholics! Or maybe we are smug about the myopic behaviour of an association that kicks out churches that welcome LGBTIQ+ people. We can all be guilty of creating sin-sorting systems in our heads and in our behaviour and in our churches.

Evans points out that people like to say, *"when they think the church is getting too soft on other people's sin..."* *'Let's not forget that Jesus told the woman to go and sin no more'....*

*To this I am always tempted to respond: **So how that's working out for you? The sinning no more thing? Because it's not going so well for me....***

It's safe to say we've missed the point when, of all the people in this [story], we decide we're the most like Jesus.... It's safe to say we've missed the point when we use his words to condemn and this story as a stone."

Perhaps we can imagine ourselves in this scene. The stone in our hand. Those who we regard as sinners before us. Jesus asking us to throw it if we are without sin? Our names and our behaviours written in the dust... and then blown away by the grace and mercy of God!

Please join me in singing, *'Open my heart'*, once and then in a prayer of confession, during which we will sing *'Open my heart'* several times again.

Call to Worship

Return to the Lord your God,

for God is gracious.

Confess to the Lord your God,

for God is merciful.

Repent to the Lord your God,

for God is slow to anger.

Praise the Lord your God,

for God abounds in steadfast love.

Come, let us worship God together!

~ written by Rev. Daniel Commerford, Posted on LiturgyLink. <https://www.liturgylink.net/>

Prayer of Confession for Ash Wednesday

O God of life,

we confess the ways we turn away
from the fullness of life that you offer.

[*silence*]

God of love,

we confess the hatred we hold in our hearts.

[*silence*]

God of compassion,

we confess our indifference.

[*silence*]

God of justice,

we confess our lives are linked to oppressive systems.

[*silence*]

God of peace,

we confess the violent movements of our hearts,
the violent realities of our world.

[*silence*]

Holy God, we confess our sins to you.

[*silence*]

Hymn of Confession – Open our hearts

Assurance of Pardon (based on Joel 2:13)

Return to the Lord your God, for God is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love. Turn toward your God in the confidence that, through Jesus Christ, your sins are forgiven.

— from *Ash Wednesday Worship, 2011* written by Joanna Harader.

Prayer of Intercession

God of Eternal Love,

We have made our commitment to You,
and have started a new journey into purposeful growth.
But, we know that if we are to remain faithful
we need Your help and Your strength.

So, we ask...

Teach us to pray with faith and read Your Word with understanding.

Teach us to worship with passion and gather together with love.

Teach us to give generously,

serve compassionately

and use our time mindfully,

so that we may reflect Your goodness,

and that others may discover Your grace through us.

In Jesus Name. Amen.

written by John van de Laar. Posted on Sacredise.com.

Benediction

Created from dust,

held together by God's extravagant love,

we turn (and turn and turn) away from sin,

and leave today embracing God's love.

~ from "An Ash Wednesday Liturgy" written by Tim Graves and posted on LiturgyBits