

John 8:2-11
Moral Grandstanding
WRCoB 2.20.22

Once there was a man
Known throughout town as the town drunk.

You could always find him down at Old Joe's barroom
On the corner by the square.

The church-going folk all knew him
And looked down their noses at him.

He was to them the epitome of a sinner.

In time, he was convicted by the Holy Spirit,
And saved by the grace of Jesus Christ.

He denounced his sinful ways
Stopped drinking
And sought to live an upright, moral life.

He started attending the local congregation
Much to the chagrin of the pastor and congregants

Whose morally superior view of themselves
Prevented any real appreciation
For the man's transformation

One Sunday he approached the pastor
Sharing his desire to be baptized
And become a member of the congregation.

The pastor hoping to discourage him
Told him to go home and pray about it to see
Whether God really wanted him to join that church.

The following Sunday, the man returned to church.

Following worship, the pastor went to him and asked
“Well, did the Lord give you any kind of message?”

“Yes sir, God did,” said the old man.

“God told me it wasn’t any use”
“He’d been trying to get into this church for years!”

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At times the church exhibits
What is known as moral grandstanding.

This is when people magnify their own morality
While seeking to shame someone else’s
Whether intentionally or subconsciously.

Moral grandstanders frequently use public discussion forums
As in Facebook or Twitter
To show off their moral superiority

It is not so much to offer a moral angle to something
As it is just a gesture of self-promotion.

Social media has gotten toxic because of it.

The scribes and Pharisees’ action in today’s Scripture
Smacks of moral grandstanding.

So, here's the scene

Jesus in the temple teaching to a crowd gathered.

The scribes and Pharisees catch a woman

In an adulterous affair

And seize the opportunity to shame Jesus.

They knew the Law was on their side.

They also knew Jesus to be very gracious and forgiving

Particularly towards the more socially unlovable people.

This was a chance to discredit Jesus

And prove their moral superiority.

It was the perfect set up.

The crowd was intently listening to Jesus

When the church leaders made their grand entrance

Dragging this poor woman into the center of the ring

So that everyone could see her disgrace.

"Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of adultery"

"The morally right thing to do is to stone her to death."

"What say you?"

Now this is moral grandstanding at its best.

By doing this, the scribes and Pharisees
Hoped to elevate their moral advantage
Showing they were on the right side of the law.

Their self-righteousness made Jesus want to puke.

But instead of responding directly
Jesus stooped to the ground
And scribbled the dirt with his finger.

Hoping, I suppose, they would just go away.

But sensing they had trapped Jesus
They pushed him even more.

Jesus stood up seething at their high and mighty attitude.

“Let he who is without sin cast the first stone.”

And he stooped again to the ground writing in the dirt.

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Jesus' answer struck at the heart of the matter.

He saw their gloating self-righteousness and hypocrisy.

He saw the glaring absence of the other guilty party

Where was her partner in crime?

It takes two to commit adultery.

Jesus saw two sins in the temple courtyard that day.

Yes, he saw the sin of adultery
He would not deny that.

But he also saw just as blatantly
The sin of self-righteousness.

And with his sentence of judgment on them
Jesus strips the mask of self-righteousness
From their faces and exposes their hypocrisy.

Jesus turned their moral grandstanding
Into an embarrassing display of sanctimony.

And the scribes and Pharisees immediately felt the shift!

What had been their attempt to cancel Jesus
Was turned on its ear by Jesus.

There was no mistaking, the crowd saw their hypocrisy.

Their moral grandstanding backfired.

Who looked the fool now?

The self-righteous caught in the trap of their own making.

Quietly, one by one, they left Jesus alone with the woman.

“Woman, where are they?”

“Has no one condemned you?”

“No one, Lord.”

“Woman, then neither do I. Go and sin no more.”

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Back in 2013 at the CoB’s Annual Conference
Held in Greensboro, NC

One of the preachers

Was the well-known author, Philip Yancey.

To this day, I remember the first words out of his mouth.

“I hope your churches are safe places for sinners.”

That’s it! I don’t remember anything more.

There is no room in the church for self-righteous behavior.

No room for moral grandstanding.

One of the biggest complaints against the church

Is its attitude of moral superiority

As if we owned virtuous living.

Church has to be a place where people come

Regular people like you and me and find refuge.

Where we are not to judge or be judged.

Church is a place where we can meet God

And experience the forgiving grace of Jesus Christ.

A place where we find a loving and welcoming community.

If not in the church, where?

If not now, when?

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We need to be careful as the church

That we don't come off as self-righteous.

We need to be careful to not fall

Into the trap of moral grandstanding.

We see it all over social media.

Liberals are doing it

And conservatives are doing it.

We need to convey the truth

That Jesus came for the broken.

And that means, brothers and sisters, you and me.

Jesus said.

Luke 5:32 NLT

³² I have come to call not those who think they are righteous, but those who know they are sinners . . .”

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Psychologist Joshua B. Grubbs has written

On the evils of moral grandstanding.

And advises all grandstanders to check their motivations.

. . . are you just trying to score points? Do you find yourself trying to one-up the good deeds of someone else to make yourself look good to people whose respect you crave?

On that particular day in the courtyard of the temple
The scribes and Pharisees were doing just that.

They were moral grandstanding
To show the crowd how morally superior they were
When compared to Jesus.

They were seeking to one-up Jesus.

Maybe they were the first to introduce us to Cancel Culture.

What they didn't anticipate was Jesus
Exposing their arrogance and self-righteousness.

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Jesus said in the Gospel of Matthew

Matthew 21:31 NRSV Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you.

Who does Jesus refer to here?
The church leaders, the self-righteous
The moral grandstanders.

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I refer again to the author Philip Yancey
And his book, "What Good is God?"

Yancey was invited to speak at a conference
On ministry to women in prostitution.

At the end of the conference, Yancey opened it up
For some informal moments.

He ended with a question of his own.

He mentioned the passage
Where Jesus said prostitutes
Would enter the kingdom before them.

And he asked.

He was speaking to the religious authorities of his day. What do you think Jesus meant? Why did he single out prostitutes?

After several minutes of silence
A young woman from Eastern Europe
Spoke up in her broken English.

Everyone, she has someone to look down on. Not us. We are at the low. Our families, they feel shame for us. No mother nowhere looks at her little girl and says, 'Honey, when you grow up I want you be good prostitute.'

Most places, we are breaking the law. Believe me, we know how people feel about us. People call us names: whore, slut, hooker, harlot. We feel it too. We are the bottom. And sometimes when you are at the low, you cry for help. So when Jesus comes, we respond. Maybe Jesus meant that.

It was Timothy Keller
Retired pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian
Who said

That Jesus consistently attracted the irreligious folk
While constantly offending the church people.

But today's churches do not have this same effect.

The kind of people Jesus attracted
Don't come to church.

In fact, they specifically avoid churches.

Why?

Because churches display
If not intentionally, then subconsciously
Some level of moral grandstanding.

We can give off the impression
We are morally superior to anyone else.

Keller says that can only mean one thing.

If the preaching of our ministries and the practice of our parishioners do not have the same effect on people that Jesus had, then we must not be declaring the same message that Jesus did.

Let's check our moral grandstanding at the door
And in humility enter his sanctuary of grace
Filled with love, grace, and mercy.