

“When a Difficulty is Not a Problem to be Solved¹”

John 8:1-12 (Jesus expands the “frame.”)

Matthew 22:15-22 (Jesus wisely answers the “trick” question.)

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We might have slightly different beliefs about exactly *how* Jesus was the Christ, the Son of God, the Son of Man, or the Prince of Peace, yet most of us *would* agree that if Jesus had a business card, it would have read, “Rabbi.” Jesus was a teacher of religion, a healer, one who anointed and was anointed, a preacher, and a friend. However, given what he said to people who were in so many different life circumstances, I think that he could just as well have been considered a psychologist. When he encountered people in complex situations, he seems to have been exceedingly clever with regard to the psyche of individuals as well as interpersonal dynamics. Almost all of the time, in the recorded material that we have, Jesus looked at *whole systems*, not just individuals when he answered questions.

Look at how insightful Jesus was in these two situations:

The Scribes and Pharisees pointed to a woman who was accused of committing adultery. The people were going to stone her, according to their laws. The religious leaders asked Jesus what action *he* would recommend.

Jesus wrote something in the sand. In other words, he took what I call a “Wise Pause.” I’m imagining that he gave himself time to think, not pressuring himself to answer immediately.

His religious colleagues kept questioning him. Jesus finally straightened up and spoke. He did what counselors today call “reframe the situation.” Think of how they presented the question to Jesus: They asked what to do with *the woman*. There were other people, too. There was the gathered crowd, ready to begin stoning the woman. And, there was evidently, also a man involved. But the “frame” had been placed only around the woman. They had said, “Do we stone her?” *Get the picture?*

What did Jesus do? After his wise pause, he moved the frame, **period**. He put the frame around the whole group. He responded: “Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” **His answer turned over the rules without even discussing the rules. [SHOW FRAMES?]**

Adultery in the ancient Hebrew world was a property issue. A woman was considered the property of her husband. The crime the man committed in adultery was merely theft. He stole another man’s property. Yet the punishment for the woman was stoning.

Do you realize what stoning meant? It did not mean that a few people would tease and taunt her by throwing stones. Stoning meant killing--throwing stones until the victim died. The law, the way it had been enforced, meant that the woman would be killed violently, even if her “adultery” had been a sexual assault upon her.

Jesus, after his wise pause, changed all this, without a lecture. He didn’t give a lawyer’s argument in support of anyone or against any one. He didn’t alter any facts or even question any facts of the case. He simply moved the “frame.” He enlarged the frame to include the whole crowd. “Let the one without sin cast the first stone.”

What a brilliant psychologist Jesus was.

Look how pitifully we have been unable to hear Jesus' message! Bible publishers title this passage, "The Woman Caught in Adultery." According to Jesus' wise answer, this passage should obviously be titled: "The woman who was about to be killed," or "The Guilty Crowd." The *title* for this incident depends upon where we put the frame. All titles do.

Think about our justice system. We are forced by our laws, the ones we make for ourselves, to put a frame around only one person in court. We know that systems affect individuals, but we punish individuals as if they were isolated from others.

Let's look briefly at another incident in which the Pharisees tried to trick Jesus. First they gave him a complement: "We know that you are sincere and teach in the way of God, and you show deference to no one, for you do not regard people with partiality." That's quite a complement for a teacher, a Rabbi-psychologist. After this complement, they asked, "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?" NOTICE the "or not?"

Whenever we are asked a question with an "or not?" we are wise to recognize that we are likely being presented with "an illusion of two alternatives." We *rarely* have ONLY two alternatives, but people may often frame a question as if we had to choose between two options. Parents present two alternatives on purpose: "Do you want to do your homework now or later?" "Do you want peas or asparagus?" A clever salesperson asks: "Do you want to buy one or two?" From another viewpoint, a clever 16 year old inquires of Dad: "Should I use your car or mom's?"

In virtually all circumstances, there are more than two options.

It's exceedingly useful when presented with two alternatives FIRST to take that wise pause, AND THEN to ask ourselves what a **third** option might be. This pause and looking for another alternative forces us to think outside the box in which we have been placed. Once we manage to think of a third option, sometimes a 4th and 5th option comes to our mind as well.

Jesus wasn't tricked by the illusion of two alternatives. We are told that he answered, "Give to the emperor what is the emperor's and to God what is God's." Here again, he didn't argue, debate, or even challenge a rule. He simply saw a bigger picture.

We should not let difficulties go on and on and on, ignoring them. Jesus did not ignore the difficulties that were presented to him.

However, it's important to notice what Jesus did NOT do. Some people wear bracelets with the initials, WWJD, ("What would Jesus do?"). Well, as important is "What Would Jesus NOT Do?" (We should create some WWJND bracelets.)

Jesus was presented two cases: the woman who was about to be murdered and the trick question about whether OR NOT to pay taxes. He responded in each case 1) by taking time, the wise pause 2) by changing the size of the frame, and 3) by presenting a third option.

What did Jesus NOT do? **More than anything, Jesus did NOT apply a "Solution" that would become a bigger problem.**

One of my greatest learning as I taught pastoral counseling for 20 years was in the field of problem solving. I do not profess to solve problems particularly well, but I have learned at least to ask this question: "Is this a *difficulty* or a *problem that requires an in depth solution*?"

One definition of a *difficulty* is “an undesirable and common life situation which can be resolved in a common sense way or for which there is no known solution, so it must be simply lived with.”

A *problem* is something that needs focused attention and *strategies to solve*.

Problems, in contrast to **difficulties**, are actually rare.

Most of the time we are faced with **difficulties**. Sometimes we are wise enough not to think of these **difficulties as problems** to solve. But sometimes we **attempt to solve a difficulty with a solution that becomes, itself, a problem**. The **solution becomes a problem**.

First, a silly example, then a serious one:

Aging has some *difficulties* associated with it: thinner skin and slower movements. Aging itself is *not a problem* to solve. Yet, we can be tempted to consider it that way. I went to the *Clinique* counter of a department store when they were giving away a “free” gift. The woman who sold me my minimum-required purchase looked at me and said, “Oh, your lips have begun feathering. You need ‘all about lips.’” I had given zero thought to my lips, let alone their “feathering,” but when she said that, I looked in the mirror. Indeed, I was not clear where the edge of my lips were. I suddenly remembered that my mother’s lips, when she got old, sort of “bled.” That is, lipstick moved into the surrounding skin. At the time I had not thought of that as a problem for her, but now, with this cosmetic saleswoman naming it as a problem, it felt like a problem. “Oh, no, my lips are feathering, I thought.” I found myself purchasing a cream that would supposedly stop this aging process. Aging had turned into a problem, not a natural, even potentially beautiful and fascinating, phenomenon that did include a few difficulties.

The serious example: We sometimes resort even to violence in an attempt to solve a difficulty. Yet, violence almost never solves anything. It is an expression of exasperation. It is the giving up on creatively working with the difficulty. **Violence perpetuates the fiction that violence does solve problems**.

Again and again it is shown that the most effective way to change behavior is to praise someone. Praise, praise, praise (not falsely, but to genuinely praise what we value and want more of). Punishment is the LEAST effective way to get someone to change their behavior. *Yet, we frequently think that we’ll add punishment (even violent punishment) to a difficulty in the hopes that it will solve something*.

We seldom ask ourselves: Does this punishment result in the desired changed? That is precisely what Jesus **did do**. Jesus lifted up a mirror--he asked the people to look at themselves before killing the woman. Then he told her to go, not to sin again. Some might say, “Jesus let her go ‘Scott free?’” The question should be: “Did Jesus’ actions and non actions lead to *change in the desired behavior*--hers and others?” I bet they did.

Jesus’ responses in these passages wisely encourages us 1) to take a wise pause 2) to expand or contract the frame around situations in case the facts seem different that way, and 3) to be very cautious in deciding upon a “solution” so that we don’t create a problem where a difficulty had been.

I began noticing many years ago a little phrase that people--like waiters, for example--use, when, for example, I spill water in a restaurant. They say, “No problem.” You’ve heard that phrase a lot, right? Well, I’m going to turn that into a kind of meditation. It’s **both psychologically healthy and religiously respectful to say, “No**

problem” to a whole lot of *difficulties*, even very big difficulties, that *we really do not want*, but that are a part of this complex and beautiful life that we do need to deal with or which will likely get resolved with common sense.

About twice a year we offer the opportunity for being anointed. This is a gesture of blessing, a touch, with olive oil, which is an ancient symbol for openness to the Spirit of Love and Wisdom. Every month we receive communion as a symbolic sacrament of God’s grace, knowing that so much of life is indeed sacramental. Anointing is a human touch that reminds us gently of God’s touch upon our lives. Feel free to receive this blessing if you choose while we are immersed in Susan’s peaceful music of the harp.

¹ This sermon is influenced psychologically by: Watzlawick, Paul, John Weakland, and Richard Fisch. *Change: Principles of Problem Formation and Problem Resolution*. W. W. Norton & Co., Inc. NY 1974.