

John 8:3ff – Following Christ will change your heart...

When have you experienced a time in your life when love changed you?
How have you felt God's unconditional love in your life?
Through which persons or events have you experienced the initiating quality of God's love?

Sisters and brothers,
in exactly that order come the first three of eight very personal questions with which the American bishop Robert Schnase finishes the first chapter of his book *Five Practices of Fruitful Living*.

The first chapter is called "Receiving God's love – The Practice of Radical Hospitality" – hospitality not to other people, to strangers and friends, as we might expect in the first place – no, it is all about hospitality to God. How do we say Yes to God? How do we make room for God in our lives?

Bishop Robert Schnase published his first book "Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations" 4 years ago. Some of us at Peace Church read it, and were very much inspired by it. It became a guideline to us; a compass to get the directions right in which we headed with our preaching, our studying and praying, our shaping of the community and our planning for the work of the church. Radical Hospitality, Passionate Worship, Intentional Faith Development, Risk-taking Mission, and Extravagant Generosity became familiar expressions and topics whenever we met and discussed in church.

When Schnase's second book was published last year, we didn't hesitate a second but ordered it and committed ourselves to reading it. And for the next couple of Sundays we will preach on it.

Bishop Schnase's first book helped us reflect the life and faith we practice in our church community. His second book however invites the readers to think about and rethink their personal faith life and their relationship to God.

How do I cultivate a life that is purposeful, deep and fruitful? What are the commitments, critical risks, and personal practices that open me to God's grace? How can I discover the spiritual life and the difference God intends me to make in the world?

These are simply some more questions Schnase asks in his challenging book. How do we answer?

Or: how would the woman, whose story we just heard in the New Testament reading, answer?

When had she experienced a time in her life when love changed her? How had she felt God's unconditional love in her life? Through what persons or events had she experienced God's love?

This woman had been brought to Jesus by the scribes and Pharisees. She was in the hands of the rulers, the lawyers, the leaders of those days. And they'd caught her in adultery... sleeping, so to say, with a man who was not her husband. No words about why she'd done that, what her life had been like... nothing... - just

the common agreement that what she'd done was not rightful and needed to be prosecuted.

The whole incident took place in the temple. Bringing this woman to Jesus was part of the scribes' and Pharisees' strategy to discredit Jesus strategy. They thought that the only options Jesus had were either to say "leave her alone" or "stone her". The first would suggest that he did not take her sin seriously enough, and the other (although required by the law) would lead people to doubt whether Jesus seriously lived out his message of love and grace.

Jesus responded by writing something on the ground. We are not told what he wrote... but maybe it was related to what he then said to them: "If anyone of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her."

By saying this, Jesus shifted the focus from himself and the woman to her accusers. He neither denied the validity of the law nor condemned the woman to death.

The accusers left, one by one, the elders first...

The story consists of three scenes. The action of it begins, when the scribes and Pharisees bring the woman and ask Jesus to judge her case.

The second scene begins when Jesus bends down and writes on the ground with his finger. He writes on the ground to indicate his unwillingness to spring the trap that has been set for him. He refuses the typical role of a Jewish male of his day to re-establish law and order and the honour of the whole people harmed by the act of adultery – that is how people thought in those days.

Nevertheless, the Pharisees continue to press him for an answer, so Jesus stands up and addresses them directly.

The last scene of the story begins, when Jesus bends down and writes on the ground again. While he is doing that, the crowd departs.

Jesus stands up again and speaks to the woman twice. And when he finishes speaking to her, she is FREE to go, just as the rest of the crowd did.

A careful reading of this story shows that Jesus' focus is not on the woman alone, but is evenly divided between the scribes and Pharisees and the woman. Jesus bends down and writes twice. And twice he stands to address his conversation partners.

What indeed is striking about this story – and also upsetting to traditions – is that Jesus treats the woman as the social human equal of the scribes and Pharisees. Jesus speaks to both sets of characters about sin. His words to the scribes and Pharisees "Let anyone among you who is without sin, be the first to throw a stone at her", focus on the past. These words let them all face the way they have lived until that moment. All of them. Men and women, saint and sinners. No exceptions!

Jesus' words to the woman "Neither do I condemn you. Go your way and from now on do not sin again", focus on the future. They express the way the woman can live from now on! ...and they express an offer to everyone present to do the same: Go your way and from now on do not sin again...

Jesus invites both sides, the scribes and Pharisees and the woman, to begin life anew from the present moment. They all are invited to give up old ways and enter a new way of life.

When the scribes and Pharisees brought the woman who had been caught in adultery to Jesus they dehumanize her. She stands there all alone, the gazes of people on her and her body, a woman chased by the eyes, and the lust, and the judgment of the men around.

Some may be holding stones in their hands.

No one is at the woman's side.

And Jesus - Jesus sits and writes on the ground, - untouched by the others in a physical way, but emotionally he is the centre of the tragic and crucial moment. He is right there. Even though he doesn't look at the woman, he is aware of her, of her fear, her despair, the threat this angry mob means to her.

Jesus is there – not at her side, but at the heart of the whole situation.

When the scribes and Pharisees dehumanize the woman, they turn her into an object for debate and discussion. But Jesus shows them that the focus lies not only on the woman and her sexual behaviour, her sin... The text does not isolate the woman's sin. Nor does Jesus single out the woman as a sinner. The text identifies all the characters as being in need of and receiving an invitation to new life.

Jesus does offer grace and mercy to sinners in this story, but the offer is extended equally to scribes and Pharisees and men and women. And the command to the woman to begin a new life is a command to all of them, a ground shifting command for a life time...

Can you remember one moment in your life that changed all the others?

Have you experienced an event that caused the ground to shift beneath you?

What has been the most overwhelming and determining experience of your life?

A love? A loss? A birth? An accident? A book? A person? A truth?

To discover love, unconditional love, may be such a moment.

Realising how much our life is held by God who is love, may be such a truth.

Love changes us, and through us, it changes others around us.

In his book Robert Schnase gives us a whole catalogue of stories of love and unexpected grace, of lives being changed once and for all: Saul on the Damascus road, Zacchaeus, Mary Magdalene, the woman at the well, Mary and Martha, the lame man by the pool, the soldier with a dying servant, and of course the woman caught in adultery.

All of them, Schnase says, "were struck by grace and penetrated by the unfathomable and overwhelming truth of God's love for them." Their eyes had been opened to see themselves and the world in a whole new way...

In all those stories God – through Jesus – says YES to these people, and each in her or his own way found the courage to say YES to God; "and in that interchange all things became new." "God's welcoming of them," so Schnase, "was met with a new hospitality towards God."

Robert Schnase describes God as someone who yearns for us and reaches out to us. God is seeking us and longing for us. God wants us and needs us.

God offers his or her love!

And we respond through accepting it and by living our lives in faith. Faith according to Schnase is the opening of our hearts inviting God's love into our lives.

"Faith is our receiving God's grace, love and pardon and allowing these gifts to shape us and make us new. Faith is the commitment again and again (!) to live by grace, to know this gift, to use it, and to pass it on..."

So far, so good.

We may believe that the woman caught in adultery was happier from the moment on after which she'd met Jesus and he'd changed her and all the other's life... "Go your way and from now on do not sin again..."

But what about us?

"Why are we not happier?" Robert Schnase asks.

As an answer comes an interesting observation: "Many of us approach the spiritual life the way we would an interesting hobby (...) like fishing, gardening, golfing, or belonging to a book club. Being Christian comprises a small part of our identity. We attend church when it's convenient, we pick up some helpful insights and enjoy the people, and we serve on committees to help the organization to run smoothly."

...let me just remind you that this is all quoting Schnase, and he goes on:

"Church, religion, and the spiritual life provide some benefit; but we remain puzzlingly remote from real interior work, mystery or notions of grace. Practising religion in this way confirms something about ourselves rather than transforming the nature of who we are."

...should Schnase be right? Are we only sometimes aware of our faith and the God who loves us? Do we forget at times, and only update the religious side of our lives when it suits us?

For many of us, Schnase writes "religion is not really a power for living; it is just an addition to a busy and hectic life. Religion is more about attending church than following Christ."

And I must admit that something in me says Yes, yes Schnase is right.

Sometimes I am losing track a bit, and it would do me good to be more connected with Jesus and the way he chose to live...

And it is as Bishop Schnase says: "we admire those people who display a depth, passion, integrity and wisdom that we have not yet discovered. We admire their vibrant faith, and the fact that they take spiritual life not so casually." But what can I do to bring God home with me and live with him or her 24 hours per day?

Robert Schnase invites us to respond to God's invitation by going our way from now on living differently...making a difference to ourselves and those we live with. We could try and practice a radical hospitality towards God, invite him into our lives deliberately and try to remind ourselves on occasion. We could make critical decisions because of our relationship to God. We could see ourselves as co-workers of God, not only in church on Sundays but in and with all we do.

We could start our day by looking at the things that lie ahead, and then connect each and every task or job or appointment or event with the thought of God, and how what we decide and do will fit in God's plan. We can reflect whether we

cooperate with God in the things we do, or whether we don't. We can try to not only know about Jesus, but let him walk at our side when we do our daily chores. And when we decide for or against things, we could actually practice to ask whether what we do or don't do is pleasing to God or not.

"Go your way and from now on do not sin anymore..." this sentence is not only meant to put an end to an unhealthy search for life, as it is in the story of the woman caught in adultery, no. It is meant to call everybody into a new way of life with a God who does not judge and punish but who forgives and opens up new beginnings.

"Go your way and from now on do not sin anymore..." is meant to call us all to change something about the way we live and believe, to change something on a daily basis, because we have seen Jesus forgiving and making a difference in people's lives.

"Go your way and from now on do not sin anymore..." seeks to remind us all of a God who wants to be present in our lives...and it wants to encourage us to seek ways to be more receptive towards God in our lives. Which steps can we take? Who can help us? And who may we be able to help?

We may discover that a life with the living God cannot be lived alone but needs other people.

In Schnase's words it sounds like that: "People who say YES to God discover the strength to say NO to many other things. People who practice radical hospitality towards God realize that opening themselves to God also involves opening themselves to the community of faith."

And here we are: in community. Saying YES to God many, many times...hoping for a happiness that only God can give, and longing for a pattern of life that is first and foremost open to God. Nothing more and nothing less.

I genuinely believe that this is possible! – Not if we seek alone, but if we meet and seek with others who also want to be open and receptive to God in a world in which he or she is so often closed out of people's lives.

Let us help and remind each other to allow God in, to make God the most important part of our lives, and go our ways from now on and live differently – with all its demands and all its delights. Amen.

Prayer

Loving God,
 your presence lifts us,
 your grace amazes us,
 your power overwhelms us,
 and your love excites us.
 No matter who we are and what we bring with us
 you always receive us as we are.
 We ask you to transform us
 and fill us with gifts of your love
 to go from this moment on
 and live our lives differently.
 Amen.