

A Woman Accused of Adultery
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United Church of Broomfield
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Palm Sunday

John 7:53-8:11 The Message

Then they all went home.

Jesus went across to Mount Olives, but he was soon back in the Temple again. Swarms of people came to him. He sat down and taught them. The religion scholars and Pharisees led in a woman who had been caught in an act of adultery. They stood her in plain sight of everyone and said, "Teacher, this woman was caught red-handed in the act of adultery. Moses, in the Law, gives orders to stone such persons. What do you say?" They were trying to trap him into saying something incriminating so they could bring charges against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger in the dirt. They kept at him, badgering him. He straightened up and said, "The sinless one among you, go first: Throw the stone." Bending down again, he wrote some more in the dirt. Hearing that, they walked away, one after another, beginning with the oldest. The woman was left alone. Jesus stood up and spoke to her. "Woman, where are they? Does no one condemn you?"

"No one, Master."

"Neither do I," said Jesus. "Go on your way. From now on, don't sin."

JENNIE:

Our class for the last six weeks has been a conversation rather than a lecture, so Carissa and I thought we'd use a similar format for our sermon. With thanks to Frances Gench for her work and apologies for how we may distort her story, here goes:

The last chapter of the book, which we will be discussing tomorrow is the story of the woman caught in adultery. It's a story which has often been used to tell us what Jesus thought about capital punishment. As I have read and thought about this chapter, I have found that while I am personally opposed to capital punishment, and I am sure that God agrees with me, I'm glad that Gench doesn't go there with this text. Instead, she has explored other aspects of the story which have uncovered more layers of meaning than I would ever have thought existed and the story spoke to me in a way it never had before.

Over the past several weeks I've grown to think of these stories as multifaceted jewels. We can turn them over and look at them from differing points of view experiencing many differing

shades of meaning. And everyone in our group has experience that add to those meanings. I'm sure that tomorrow we will find that to be just as true of this story.

This is a story that over the years has made many interpreters uncomfortable for a variety of reasons. In earlier versions of the Bible, it was located in several differences, John or even Luke. Sometimes it was even omitted, especially in the very earliest manuscripts we have. Yet, it has the earmarks of a very old story traceable back to the earlier oral traditions about Jesus. Why was it suppressed or omitted? Probably because early Christian communities found it embarrassing. We wouldn't, after all, want to give the impression that the Lord approved of adultery or of misbehaving wives! That's ironic don't you think: a story about forgiveness and grace where even Jesus' own followers thought he went too far?

CARISSA:

The story of this woman being brought to Jesus for judgement and punishment due to being accused of adultery, is an emotionally charged one. There are many interpretations that can be understood from it. But they are all related to deep topics that can cause debate and division, that are uncomfortable to hear about and discuss.

For me, this story has always been about the death penalty. I have heard people tell this story as a way to show that Jesus did not approve of the stoning of this woman, which for those people interpreting it, translated into a larger understanding of Jesus standing against the death penalty itself. Interesting, Gench never mentions this interpretation.

Instead, she focuses on the woman's story, rather than the situation she finds herself in. In doing so, however, Gench does not avoid controversial issues.

First, if this unnamed woman was "caught in the act" of adultery, where is her partner? Why is he or she not also brought before Jesus and the crowd? To address this, we need to remember the time this woman lived in. Given the sexual norms of the time, we can assume the woman was caught with a man, otherwise the other woman would also have been brought before the crowd.

During those days, men were permitted to be intimate with whomever they chose, even if they were married. Remaining sexually faithful to their wife was not something men had to be concerned with from either a legal or moral perspective. For women, however, the penalty was death. If the man was also a Roman, perhaps a soldier, then there was no way he could be brought before Jewish leaders for punishment of any kind. The Romans were in power. Not only did they not adhere to Jewish law, but they were untouchable when it came to the treatment of those they had power over.

A deeper, possibly darker question then becomes: what was the woman's situation that led her to adultery in the first place? In other words, why would she risk this behavior, knowing the consequences? In society today, even though adultery is frowned upon as a social norm, there are no legal consequences for it. It is not a punishable offense by law. Of course, there are

ramifications of such a decision, but one will not spend time in jail, or even pay a fine. Certainly no one would think of sentencing someone to death for having an affair.

But for this unnamed woman that was the penalty, so it is safe to assume that for her it was either a decision not taken lightly or not a decision at all. It is a possibility that this woman had fled from an abusive situation. Given the way society was structured, she had to have a man provide for her and chaperone her in public. Women also could not initiate divorce – only men could. If she did flee a dangerous situation and found another man who treated her kindly, she would be considered an adulterous woman. Catching her in the act might not have necessarily meant a sexual act, but the act of living with one man while being married to another.

The other possibility is that she was forced. Can you imagine the feelings this woman would have had, first being sexually violated, then being brought before others to kill her for it?

When we read the story from our modern lens, these are often the nuances we miss. So, what about those who brought her before the crowd in the first place?

JENNIE:

In this week's chapter, Gench not only talked about the way the woman had a life-saving encounter with Jesus, but also about the Pharisees. A more traditional reading of the story may suggest that the Pharisees are losers in a battle of wits with Jesus. John's portrait of the pharisees is overall hostile, not just here but throughout his gospel. That's probably because John was written for a community traumatized by its expulsion from the synagogue. But perhaps we can look beyond to a different explanation for their behavior: and even a more grace-filled ending for them, as well.

At least one scholar has suggested that the pharisees may have been seeking Jesus' wisdom or advice. That would have followed common practice of the day. Some writers at the time noted that contrary to the portrait painted here, Jewish Pharisees were in fact, very reluctant to impose a death sentence. Mercy is, after all, a value expressed many places in the Hebrew Bible. Having heard of the new teacher from Galilee, they may have sought his help in finding a loophole to a law which they themselves thought too harsh, at least in this case.

Or maybe they really were part of an outraged mob seeking to impose the harshest possible penalty on a woman who they felt had threatened the moral foundations of their community. That kind of thinking may seem strange to use today. Carissa is right that while we may not approve of adultery, it certainly doesn't carry the kinds of penalties it did in this story. But the writers of the Hebrew Bible clearly often used adultery to describe the way that Israel strayed from its relationship to God, so the sin here carries a lot of additional weight which we don't always give it. Jesus, as well as the Pharisees, might well have thought it was very serious indeed. Through the centuries, as we have noted, commentators have had real trouble with the idea that Jesus might actually have forgiven this woman. And even in our own day, many people have a great deal of trouble with any kind of behavior which might violate sexual norms. The outrage of the Pharisees may seem familiar to us. But perhaps, just perhaps when they

looked inside themselves, they found a kind of kinship with the woman they had accused. That would have been a kind of grace – and very good news.

CARISSA:

In the end, what is our take away from this story? Jesus tells the woman to “go your way and from now on, do not sin again.” This, however, is somewhat confusing. He admonishes the crowd, “Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her,” which implies Jesus understands that no one is without sin and is reminding the crowd of this fact as well. So, why would he then tell the woman to not sin again when he knows that is an impossible ask?

Some of the scholars in our book struggle with this moment between Jesus and the woman. They wonder if Jesus is telling her to return to her husband, who is possibly abused, because being with the other man is a “sin.” Or telling her not to sin anymore when she was possible the victim of sexual assault.

But I don’t think so. I believe this is a moment of grace. It allows the woman to walk away with judgment removed. You’ll notice Jesus does not specifically forgive this woman, but instead points out that no one is left to judge her, and that he won’t either. Then he sends her on her way, free of judgment, to go forward in her life with a new sense of hope.

Judgement of others is one of the things we struggle with the most as humans, and it is one of the most destructive of the sins we commit. It breaks down community and is just as damaging to the judges as it is to the person being judged. It is a breach of both trust and love.

The way to combat this sin is to truly love ourselves. The less we judge ourselves for our shortcomings, while understanding we will fall short, the less likely we are to sit in judgement of others.

One moment, one decision, is not the defining moment or decision for a person’s entire character. Jesus helps us recognize that here. All judgement in this story is set aside – for the Pharisees AND for the woman. The story demonstrates the hope that comes from Jesus that we too will not be judged, but that we will be forgiven. The hope that grace wins.