

One by One

John 7:53-8:11

Jim Zazzera, Faith Presbyterian Church, 08.26.2012

Sometimes we think we know a place—the roads, the houses, the weather. But every now and then we see something new. A different car parked in front to the neighbors place. The sound of children where before there was only silence. A puppy barking as we walk down the street.

Sometimes we think we know a person—her voice, what she likes for dinner, her favorite pair of shoes. But every now and then we see something new. She cuts her hair in a dramatically different style. She breaks down in tears when sharing an old memory. She asks you a question she has never asked before.

Sometimes we think we know a Bible passage—we have read it dozens of times, we see it portrayed in great art, we sing about it in a favorite hymn. But every now and again we hear experience it in a new way. Maybe it has happened to you. When you realized that David the King was not just royalty but a broken sinner. When you saw Mary the mother of Jesus not as a scared girl, but a warrior for God. When you first understood how early Christians broke down social barriers between Jews & Gentiles, slaves and free people, men and women.

I think today's story is one we need to "see again for the first time."¹ When you saw it in the bulletin or heard it read maybe you said, "Yeah, I know this — I got this one..." When you heard the phrase, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone..." you might have thought, "I know this quotation, but I always thought it was from Ben Franklin."

It is true, this is one of the most familiar and brilliant stories of Jesus in all of scripture. The details are vivid and the meaning is profound. And it is rightly appreciated by storytellers, poets, community leaders, and people of all faiths. But, as you might guess, I would like to suggest that we are not seeing the whole passage clearly. It is like a house that has grown too familiar, with cracks and imperfections we overlook. It is like a relationship that has had a long life, with personal quirks we just ignore. It is like a problem with which we have grown weary, and we have set many things aside.

One place to start is with the traditional title of this story. This passage is usually called something like, "The Woman Caught in Adultery." Though "titles" of Bible stories are never listed in any early manuscripts, they do take on a life of their own. "The Prodigal Son." "Jonah and the Big Fish." "Paul on the Damascus Road." But isn't this passage about more than "A Woman Caught in Adultery?" Why not call it "Jesus Challenges Hypocritical Religious Leaders?" (I know, doesn't quite flow off the tongue...) Or how about "Jesus Writes in the Dirt?" Or maybe, "Jesus and the Scandal of Forgiveness?"

You see – we come to this story and we already think we know what it is about. It is about a woman caught in adultery. But isn't it also about the rigid legalism of religious leaders? Isn't it also about the man who wasn't caught? Isn't it about the wisdom of Jesus? Isn't it about Jesus' almost scandalous compassion? Doesn't this passage say something about the relationship between law and grace? I am constantly reminded how quickly I can jump to conclusions about what a Bible passage says.

So what is going on here that we might have over looked? What aspects of this familiar Bible passage have we ignored? This passage is unquestionably about sin and forgiveness. But to stop at that is to unfairly simplify this text. To only say that is to domesticate a powerful message given by Jesus.

¹ This concept is taken from the title of a book by Marcus Borg *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*

What I would like to do today is to point out some things I never noticed before. To be precise, I want to share with you *four things* that I had previously not paid attention to in this text.

First, imagine the scene. Jesus, the religious leaders, and the woman. Pay careful attention to verse 3. They make “her stand before all of them.” This woman is brought before Jesus as an example. As a pawn. As a tool. The religious leaders have little regard for her individual plight. They are really not even concerned about punishing sin, otherwise where is the man who is also caught in adultery?

Though Roman law in that place and time would have made it illegal², the Hebrew Scriptures clearly prescribe death for both men and women who are caught up in this sin.³ Like it is and has been in so many places and times, women are easy targets for political and religious power plays. There is no concern here for the woman or her particular life, only the desire to “trap” Jesus and make a religious statement.

For me, it is hard not to make the connection to our own national and international debates about the role of women in our world. In our discussions we often seem to overlook the needs, concerns and commitments of particular individual women and their struggles. We worry about making political points, swaying the electorate, or maintaining institutional control. We use women for our own purposes. Quietly and compassionately caring for particular women in their own need doesn’t usually win many arguments, but that is exactly what Jesus does here.

What the story shows us by negative example is how the powerless can be used and abused by those with their own need to control. *That is the first overlooked aspect of this story.*

Now keep that thought in mind as I read to you snippets of two other, parallel sections of this passage. Listen to verses 6 and 7: *Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them...* To verse 8: *And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground.* And to verse 10: *Jesus straightened up and said to her...*

The gospel writer goes to great lengths to describe to describe Jesus physical movement in this story. I would like to physically demonstrate what is happening. Is there someone who would like to volunteer to simply stand here and respond to a few easy questions? (I promise I wont embarrass you!)

Please stand here in the center and look at the congregation. Now would everyone else please stand and look at this person? [Address to the person] *What does that feel like to you?* [Response]

Now while everyone is still looking at you, what about if I come out here in front of you and bend down? What if I bide my time by moving my finger around on the ground? *What happens in our experience of each other? What does that feel like?* [Response from person] *What happens to your experience of this crowd? What does it feel like now?* [Response from person] Finally, what happens then if I stand up, look you in the eye, and address you directly? *How does that feel to you?* [Response from person] Thank you for your help.

I would like to suggest that Jesus is doing a number of things here with his bodily movement that in fact compliments what he is trying to say to the woman, the religious leaders, and the gathered crowd.

² *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine, p. 174.

³ The Old Testament prescribes this punishment for man and woman in Leviticus 20:10 and Deuteronomy 22:22-24 see *The Gospel of John* Dale Bruner p. 505

First, he “bends down.” What an interesting thing to do. When he bends down he does two things. First, Jesus deliberately (I think) takes himself out of a place of power, and becomes vulnerable. He puts himself physically “on a level playing field” with both the woman and the scribes and Pharisees. He chooses not to make pronouncements from on high, but becomes equal to both the woman and the leaders. As I read this, I can’t help but recall the words of Paul in Philippians 2:6-8 in which we are told that Jesus:

*did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself...*

In this passage Jesus literally humbles himself and changes the power dynamic of this mob and its victim.

But a second thing happens here. In one masterful action, Jesus takes the gaze off of the woman and calls it onto himself. She is no longer alone in her plight, but finds someone who has compassion enough for her to take on her shame. In this simple gesture, Jesus offers the woman a kind of rescue.

Then there is one more thing here to attend to here, something I had never seen before in reading this passage. Before Jesus addresses the scribes and Pharisees, the Gospel says Jesus “straightens up.” In the same way, before he addresses the woman, Jesus also, “straightens up.” No one here is a mere pawn to Jesus—not the religious leaders— not the woman. Each is dignified by their encounter with him. He stands up, looks them in the eye, and speaks to them face-to-face, one to one, as equals.

The religious leaders are not treated with more deference than the woman. Nor is the woman glorified and the leaders humiliated. Each are met as people created in the image of God and honored with attention, respect, truth, and compassion. We might want to criticize the woman and hail her accusers. Or more likely we would like to vilify these pious ones and celebrate the forgiven victim, but Jesus does neither. Jesus treats both as beloved children of God. *That is a second overlooked aspect of this story.*

And now for a little more audience participation. Please find the Gospel of John in whatever bible you have, either your personal bible or in the pew. Now look up John 7:53 – 8:11, our text from today. Do you notice anything strange before verse 7:53 or after 8:11? [Response]

“Brackets.” That’s right, brackets. Does anyone know what that means? Anyone have a sense of what it means when a portion of the Biblical text in our English Bibles are bracketed like this? Most Bibles will also have a note about this bracketing. What does it say?

My NIV Bible says this: “The earliest and most reliable manuscripts and other ancient witnesses do not have John 7:53-8:11”⁴ *This text did not appear in some of our earliest versions of the Gospel of John.*

Now let me explain how this works. The Bible did not come to us in English. The Old Testament was originally written in Hebrew and the New Testament in Greek (with some Aramaic). Our current English Bibles (whatever versions they are NRSV, NIV, etc.) are translated from the original manuscripts by scholars. The problem is – there is no ONE original manuscript of the Bible. (We do not have the actual scrolls or papyri that were written out by the followers of Jesus who composed the New Testament.) What we have today is scholars making wise decisions from our many manuscripts.⁵ Some are older, some are considered more reliable. And many of the most trusted manuscripts just don’t have this

⁴ Note from the NIV Study Bible, p. 2045.

⁵ The earliest manuscript from the Gospel of John dates from about 125 – 160A.D.,

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Biblical_manuscript

passage. (So by now you must be saying, “*now* you tell me, Pastor Jim, why are we even listening to this story?”)

But here is the issue. This story has come to us through history as part of many manuscripts, and most scholars, conservative and liberal alike are convinced it has “all the earmarks of historical veracity.”⁶ In other words, most serious students of the Bible believe that this is a true story about Jesus.

And here is the point I take from this. Though this is a real story about Jesus, someone, somewhere in Christian history had some problem with this story. Somebody didn’t like the message this story told. One scholar named Gail O’Day writes that if you review ancient manuscripts, “this text has an unusually high number off textual variants, approximately 80 variants out of 180 words.”⁷ In other words, someone in the tradition wanted to change this passage because it troubled them so much. O’Day goes on to comment, “...most of the variations [in manuscripts] tend to *domesticate* the text...”⁸ Someone is trying to make this a more palatable story. Someone doesn’t like what John 7:53 – 8:11 says.

Lets think about it, what bothers you here in the passage? What in this text do you react to? Is it that the Jewish community is portrayed as stoning a sinner? Is it that this story calls into question the religious establishment? (Of which we are part in this day and age.) Is it that Jesus is a little too soft on sin, that he lets this woman go without even a serious rebuke? Is it that Jesus doesn’t use this as an occasion to make a significant pronouncement on issues of sexuality and marriage? Or could it even be that Jesus is too easy on the ones we might call the hypocrites, the woman’s accusers?

Maybe it bothers all of us for all of those reasons. I often find that is those passages that trouble me the most are those places where God teaches me the most. I wonder if it is precisely *because* this passage is so troublesome to many of us that there is important truth here to attend to? *This is a third overlooked aspect of this story.*

Finally, there is an important little phrase that I think gets at the heart Jesus’ message. You might not immediately notice it. First, Jesus makes his famous pronouncement, “Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.”⁹ Then he bends down and writes on the ground, creating a rather pregnant pause in the proceedings. The Gospel writer tells us this in verse 9, “When they heard it, they went away, *one by one...*”

One by one. One by one. Think about it, each man considering Jesus words. Each man, laying down his stone. What was in their minds? Some may have thought, “Wow, this guy is right—I’m outta here.” Others may have said, “Boy, I had not thought about it that way, I really need to look at myself.” Still others might think, “Well this woman deserves it, but I am not going to embarrass myself by being the only one to give this woman her just punishment.” Now don’t miss this—each one of these men came as part of an undifferentiated mob, yet the Gospel writer tells us they all leave, “one by one,” each considering Jesus’ words and each considering the state of his own soul.

Jesus stood up and spoke to them as equals, not diminishing their personhood either before during or after the confrontation. Each person, one by one, is left to consider his life. Jesus also stood up to the woman as an equal, and gave her the dignity of considering her own life condition. “Where are they?” he says. “Has no one condemned you? Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.”

⁶ *The Gospel of John*, Dale Bruner, p. 508.

⁷ *Journal of Biblical Literature*, “John 7:53-8:11, A Study in Misreading,” Gail O’Day, pp. 638-639.

⁸ *Journal of Biblical Literature*, “John 7:53-8:11, A Study in Misreading,” Gail O’Day, pp. 639.

⁹ *John 8:7 NRSV*

Face to face, Jesus invites the woman's accusers to consider their lives. Face to face, Jesus invites the woman herself to consider her life. And the words he delivers to the woman are really words that are also meant for the leaders who wandered away one by one. *Neither do I condemn you. Go your way. Do not sin again. This is the final (and to me) most important overlooked part of this text.*

Jesus is brilliant in how he allows us, one by one, to come face to face with our own sin, wherever we find it. *Do not sin again.* Jesus is even more amazing in how he always reminds us, one by one, of God's amazing compassion and forgiveness. *Neither do I condemn you.* You see we are never categories to God. We are always individuals. Broken, needy, crying out for compassion. *And we are beloved.*

Monk and mystic Thomas Merton captured a bit of this sense when he wrote in his autobiography about a turning point, a kind of conversion that he experienced. From that day forward, he wrote, "All I know is that I walked into a new world."¹⁰ Paul the Apostle communicates much the same sentiment in his letter to the church in Corinth, "...if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!"¹¹

A day of anger and accusation turned into a day of newness. One by one, people began to see, began to change. One by one by one by one—may that be so for us today! Amen!

¹⁰ *Seven Storey Mountain*, Thomas Merton, p. 231.

¹¹ 1 Corinthians 5:17 NRSV

Next Step Questions

1. This is a particularly intriguing text, with a great story. Sometimes, though, because we have heard it so many times, we think we know a story. Read John 7:53-8:11 again. What stood out to you or surprised you in your reading of the passage this time?
2. The unnamed woman in this story was singled out for her sin (even though the Hebrew scripture's punishment for adultery applies to both the man and woman). Where is the man? Can you think of ways in our world today that women are singled out for punishment or oppression?
3. Notice that the woman was used as a "tool" by the religious leaders to trap Jesus. Have you ever found yourself ignored as a person but used for someone's purposes? What was that like?
4. The usual name for this passage (not part of the original writings) is usually "The Woman Caught in Adultery." Why do you think it is named that way? Is that the best name for this passage? Can you think of a better title that would embrace the full meaning of this story?
5. One of the most striking aspects of the story is the movement of Jesus. He "bends down," "writes on the ground," and "straightens up." What was that about? How would Jesus' behavior have affected those gathered there?
6. The story tells us that the woman's accusers leave "one by one." They come as an undifferentiated mob but leave as individuals. What are some of the thoughts they might have had as they left the scene? How would Jesus' words have affected them?
7. In the final scene, Jesus stands up and addresses the woman individually, with clarity and kindness. Can you think of a time where you knew you had done something wrong, and someone who could have accused or punished you treated you with compassion? What was that like? Why do you think the person treated you that way?
8. Jim mentioned that this passage is not present in the earliest manuscripts of the Gospel of John and that some have tried to change or ignore this passage. Why do you think some in the church might think this passage is problematic?
9. How would it feel to hear these words in your life: "Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again?"