

Encounters with Jesus: Between a Rock and a Hard Place

John 8:1-11

[A sermon preached by the Rev. Stan Gockel at the First
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I

Today's gospel lesson is one of the most dramatic in the Bible.

The scene itself is greatly disturbing.

Jesus is teaching in the Jerusalem temple,
sitting, as rabbis do when they teach.

Around him stands an eager group of people, listening intently.

His friends and disciples are there as well.

Suddenly a commotion interrupts his teaching.

I picture a group of angry men—
scribes and Pharisees—
literally dragging a woman along.

Their faces are red with self-righteous fervor.

Her tear-stained face is etched with fear.

She has violated the religious law,
the holiness code in the Book of Leviticus,
which lists adultery, along with a lot of other offenses—
talking back to your parents, for example—
as a capital crime.

The punishment is death by stoning,
a particularly horrible form of execution,

still practiced in some parts of the world.

She's been caught in the act.

There is no denying her guilt.

So why don't they go ahead and stone her?

Why do they bring her to Jesus?

What will Jesus say to her accusers?

What will he say to her?

II

Before we get to those questions, there are several other important questions that this story leaves hanging in the air.

For one thing, where is the man who was with the woman?

The text says she was caught in the very act of committing adultery.

It always takes two to tango, so where is her partner in impropriety?

Is his absence a reflection of the perennial double standard when it comes to women and sexuality?

Has the woman been entrapped—falsely accused by a disgruntled husband who wants her out of the way so he is free to take up with a younger woman?

Or was her partner perhaps a Roman soldier—
who, as a member of the occupying military force,
was immune from prosecution?

Furthermore, the Law stipulates that two witnesses are required to verify guilt.

But no witnesses are forthcoming.

Clearly the agenda here is not the woman's sin or the Law's requirements.

Indeed, their target is really Jesus.

"They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him." (v. 6)

Jesus finds himself between a rock and a hard place,

How will he respond to what is in effect a lynch mob?

If he says no to her execution, his enemies can charge him with repudiating the Law of Moses.

After all, he said he had come to fulfill the law, not to destroy it.

On the other hand, if he consents to her death by stoning, he will clash with the Roman authorities.

In this tiny occupied country, Rome alone retains the power of life and death.

These men want Jesus to join them in being judge, jury, and executioner.

"What do you say about this, Jesus? You know the law."

What will Jesus say?

What would you say?

III

Instead of answering, Jesus bends over and begins to write in the dust at his feet.

It is the only time in the gospels we read of Jesus writing anything, and no one knows what he wrote.

Even so, speculation abounds.

Some maintain that he was merely doodling,

trying to contain his anger or buy time
in order to reflect on his response.

Others suggest he was listing the sins of the woman's accusers,
or perhaps making a list of the Ten Commandments.

Frances Taylor Gench, whose book Encounters With Jesus is the primary resource for these sermons, tells of leading a Bible study where a woman said she knew exactly what Jesus wrote: **"It Takes Two."**

Others scholars point out that in the Mediterranean world of Jesus' day, such non-verbal actions would have been recognized as an act of refusal and disengagement.

In this interpretation, it is the act of writing itself that is important.

Jesus distances himself from the woman's accusers and slows down their momentum for vengeance and death.

He writes in the dust as they continue to push him for an answer.

Finally...he straightens up,
looks slowly at each angry face,
gazes into each pair of eyes,
and then he says,

"Whichever of you is without sin should throw the first stone at her."

No one moves.

No one says a word.

The silence is tense and heavy.

The woman, lying in the dirt, holds her breath.

The oldest man in the crowd,
one of the elders,
slowly looks at the stone in his hand,
drops it and turns and walks away.

Then another, a Pharisee, does the same,
 then another and another and another
 until they are all gone.

The woman is still lying in the dirt,
 moments from an excruciating death,
 still alive yet hardly daring to breathe.

Jesus bends down again,
 writes in the dust,
 then slowly straightens up.

Now it's just the two of them.

Catholic sister Irene Zimmerman captures the intense emotion of this moment in a poem:

*From the angry crunch of their sandaled feet
 as they left the courtyard, Jesus knew,
 without looking up from his writing on the ground,
 that the Pharisees and scribes still carried their stones.*

*The woman stood where they'd shoved her,
 her hair hanging loose over neck and face,
 her hands still shielding her head
 from the stones she awaited.*

*"Woman," he asked, "has no one condemned you?"
 The heap of woman shuddered, unfolded.
 She viewed the courtyard -- empty now --
 with wild, glazed eyes and turned back to him.
 "No one, Sir," she said, unsurely.*

*Compassion flooded him like a wadi after rain.
 He thought of his own mother -- had she known such fear? --*

*and of the gentle man whom he had called Abba.
Only when Joseph lay dying had he confided
his secret anguish on seeing his betrothed
swelling up with seed not his own.*

*"Neither do I condemn you," Jesus said.
"Go your way and sin no more."*

*Black eyes looked out from an ashen face,
empty, uncomprehending.
Then life rushed back.
She stood before him like a blossoming tree.*

*"Go in peace and sin no more,"
Jesus called again as she left the courtyard.*

*He had bought her at a price, he knew.
The stony hearts of her judges
would soon hurl their hatred at him.
His own death was a mere stone's throw away.*

IV

This dramatic encounter with Jesus teaches us an important lesson about judging others.

In the PBS series "Downton Abbey," the butler Carson takes the valet Bates aside for a conversation.

Carson says, *"I hope you don't judge me too harshly."*

Bates says, *"I don't judge you at all. I have no right to judge you or any man."*

In the Sermon on the Mount we have one of the sayings of Jesus that is quoted by Christians and non-Christians alike, Matthew 7:1—

"Do not judge, so that you may not be judged."

Jesus teaches that only the guiltless have the right to judge.

There is no doubt that the whole of the biblical witness identifies adultery as sin and does not condone it.

There is also no question that we live in a society that typically judges sexual behavior more harshly than any other sin.

The church, sadly, is no exception.

Baptist pastor Welton Gaddy in his book, Adultery and Grace: the Ultimate Scandal, treats adultery as a sin, a manifestation of human brokenness in need of God's forgiveness and redeeming power. He writes:

"All too often...local churches—ostensibly dispensaries of grace—compound the problems and intensify the trauma that plague people who have committed adultery. Ministers preach biblical grace, but practice vengeful judgment. Congregations invite 'any and all' people to experience God's forgiveness, but turn away from their fellowships individuals guilty of 'morals' charges...the church tends to treat adultery as a sin so terrible that applying grace to it is unimaginable, thus demonstrating a scandalous misunderstanding of sin, adultery and grace."

Grace, he says, refuses to allow an episode of adultery to serve as the ultimate commentary on a person's life and character.

We are all stand in need of grace...

we all have much in our lives that needs to be forgiven.

Judging another person's actions or character is not only arrogant, it is also hypocritical.

Church history professor Roberta Bondi says judgmentalism is one of the fundamental struggles of the Christians life:

"Judgmentalism destroys community; it destroys those who do the judging, and, even more seriously...it often destroys (and certainly excludes from community) the one who is judged. On a small scale judgmentalism

destroys marriages, families, and churches. On a wider scale it provides the major fuel of racism, sexism, neglect of the poor, and national self-righteousness.”

She concludes:

“Judgmentalism...as a breach of love is as serious as any other sin we might commit against one another.”

How are we to be set free from a judgmental spirit?

This story in John 8 suggests that self-knowledge plays a crucial role.

By seeing ourselves as sinners in need of grace,
we can begin to heal the spirit of judgmentalism in our hearts.

Acknowledging that we are sinners means taking seriously the reality that we all do, or are at least capable of doing, terrible things.

We cannot love other people unless we understand at a deep level that our human failings put us all in the same boat.

To know ourselves as sinners
and thereby to heal our judgmental hearts,
is the beginning of being able to extend ourselves in love and
compassion toward others.

We all share in the common human struggle with sin.

And we are all equally dependent upon God’s amazing grace.

V

“Neither do I condemn you. Go now, and leave your life of sin.”

Jesus extended to this woman that which we all need: **grace**.

Grace is always amazing, powerful, and transformative.

My own conclusion about what Jesus wrote in the dust—

the angry mob with stones in their hands imploring him to join them in
 condemning the woman—
 are words he knew,
 and he knew they knew,
 by heart,
 the same words we read this morning from Psalm 130...

*If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities,
 Lord, who could stand?
 But there is forgiveness with you.*

And after one by one they dropped their stones and walked away,
 leaving Jesus and the woman alone,
 he again bent down and wrote in the dust.

This time I think what he wrote was just for her:

*With the Lord there is steadfast love...
 and with him is great power to redeem.*

“Go,” he said, “go and sin no more.”

Go back to your husband and your family.

Make amends.

Ask for forgiveness.

Start all over again.

It is possible...with God’s grace, everything is new and fresh and possible.

And those angry men: did his grace get through to them, too?

It must have, for it caused them to release their grip on the stones of judgment,
 condemnation, and hatred in their hands...

to let go of the self-righteous judgmentalism in their hearts...

to allow love and forgiveness and grace
into their religion and their lives and their hearts.

For only when we let go of the stones of judgment and accusation will our hearts be open to the marvelous grace of our loving Lord.

VI

What is in your hand today?

Is it time to let it go?

Amen.

Sources:

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