

First Presbyterian Church, Spartanburg SC
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INNOCENT OR GUILTY?

John 8:1-11

We continue our series of sermons this morning looking together at the story of Jesus and his ministry through the eyes of the gospel writer, St. John, one of the four gospel writers that we find in the pages of the bible. So far we have looked at the first seven chapters, and we've seen Jesus' enormous capacity to love people: his choice again and again to use his great power not to condemn people, not to blast people, not to hurt people, but to raise them up and to give them life together. We have seen Jesus' love of people as individuals: we meet many of them by name. And we have seen Jesus' love of great crowds of people, including that great crowd of over 5,000 people that Jesus met and fed on a Galilean hillside above the Sea of Galilee when they were hungry: when the hungry emotionally, when they were hungry spiritually, when they were hungry physically.

So we have seen the great love and power of Jesus in these opening chapters. And yet, as Jesus taught and as Jesus healed and as Jesus loved people, we have also seen a growing understanding among the people who heard him that his message, his claims about himself, his message, his claims upon the lives of those who heard him, were all so exclusive, so threatening, so troubling, so all encompassing that there was no middle ground in the reaction to Jesus -- you were either for him or you were against him. He was, not as C.S. Lewis pointed out, he was not just a nice guy or a great teacher. Nobody who heard him could leave him with that impression only. Or, let me put it this way: he may have been a nice guy and he may have been a great teacher but that was not the impression he left with you. People were increasingly forced by Jesus to take sides. You were either for him or against him. And by the seventh chapter (that we looked at last week), John tells us that some people were growing so angry with this Jesus, they were so threatened by his words, so challenged by his words, he was so forcing them to change their way of life -- that they were beginning to get really, really angry with him. Some of them wanted even to put him to death.

The other three gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, make it clear in this context of "wanting to put Jesus to death," that from time to time Jesus' opponents would try to trap him. They would try to get him to say something religious or political that would give them or the Roman occupiers of Israel a pretext to arrest him. So you may remember some of these questions that they asked him:

- "Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar . . . to the hated Roman invaders?"
- Or this question, "Who is my neighbor?"

Now to a certain extent, these questions may seem to us to be rather innocuous -- but place them today in the context of Iraq. Imagine somebody asking these questions in Iraq with a television camera on the person answering.

- An interviewer says to somebody, “Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, that is, to President Bush? It is lawful to pay taxes to the Americans?” What is your reaction going to be? Can you win? It doesn’t matter how you answer! -- tomorrow you will die if it becomes public knowledge. It was as incendiary as this in Israel at that time.
- Or think, perhaps, of this one, “Who is my neighbor?” Ask that one publicly. “Who is my neighbor? Are the Americans my neighbor? Are the Sunnis my neighbor? Are the Shiites my neighbor? Are the Iranians my neighbor? Are the Kurds my neighbor?” Or all of these! It doesn’t matter what you answer, Somebody will have it in for you by the time you have finished.
- On a more humorous note, these kinds of questions were rather like that age-old question, “Have you stopped beating your wife?” You know that one. If you say ‘yes,’ then that means you were beating her before. If you say ‘no,’ that means you are still beating her now. There is no way to answer that question quickly and to win.

And that really is the context of our story today, where a woman is brought to Jesus, a woman who had been caught committing adultery. There is no question she is guilty. That is not really the issue here. No question that she is guilty. Her accusers, though, ask Jesus a question that is inevitably going to get him into trouble if he answers it quickly; if he answers yes or no. They ask his opinion as to what the penalty should be for her action: should they invoke the death penalty in this case, as the Law of Moses seems to prescribe for the act of committing adultery? Should they stone her to death: pile great piles of rock on her until they crush her body and bury her?

The trick in all of this, the trap in all of this, is that if Jesus does answer quickly, with a quick yes or a quick no, he is going to be in trouble either way.

- If he has pity on the woman and he says, “No, no, no. Don’t do that” then the Jewish authorities can blame him for being soft on the Law of Moses, soft on the Word of God . . . “Don’t you know what the Word of God says? It is written right here.” And Jesus can be accused of being soft on that.
- But if he says, “Yes. Go ahead. Put her to death” then he is going to get into great trouble with the Roman authorities, with the Roman occupiers. They have taken away the power of capital punishment from the Jewish people, from the Jewish authorities, and all the authorities need to do as soon as they hear Jesus say, “Yes, she deserves to die” is to stir up that mob, incite the crowd, and have them stone the woman, put her to death -- and then point the finger at Jesus and say, “Ah, he is the one who to blame.” And immediately the Romans will take him away for inciting a riot and for taking the law into his own hands.

So here Jesus is in a great predicament and he does what any wise person will do (but what I fail to do and what I think all of us from time to time fail to do when we are in such an emotionally packed and charged situation like this), he did what we ought to do. He resisted the temptation to respond immediately. He resisted the temptation to respond immediately. He took his time. He took his time to think and to pray, to marshal his thoughts, perhaps to control his anger, almost certainly to renew his love not only for the woman but also for her wretched, wretched accusers (John 8:3-7)

Early in the morning, he came again to the temple. All of the people came to him and he sat down and began to teach them. The scribes and Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery and making her stand before all of them, how humiliating. They said to him, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. Now in the Law, Moses commanded us to stone such women. What do you say?" They said this to test him so that they might have some charge to bring against him. And then Jesus bent down and wrote with this finger on the ground.

"Wrote with his finger on the ground?" What in the world did he write? Well, these words have give scholars a field day, speculating on what Jesus wrote on the ground.

- Some people think he wrote the Ten Commandments on the ground.
- Some people think he wrote out the sins of his accusers or the accusers of the woman on the ground.
- Some people think he wrote some other verses of scripture on the ground.

Personally I join my life with the writings of a scholar by the name of Raymond Brown, who suggests that Jesus just might have been doodling. Nothing more. Doodling. I think he was just taking time, calming down, taking his eyes off of the accusers, counting to ten, before responding. And what a critical step that is for all of us, especially in this age of immediacy in which we live. The world of cell phones, the world of instant messages, the world of e-mails, the world of faxes (although they are getting passé). That's the kind of world in which we live, a world in which people expect a response immediately, *now!*—*Didn't I send that fax to you? Didn't you get it?* What do you say? How critical for us to take our time to think, to take our time to pray.

Whatever he was writing in the ground, head bowed down, Jesus was certainly slowing down this whole process, and in the process he was figuring out what was going on, and how he should respond. SO, what did he figure out?

Well, in the first place, he figured out something what may seem obvious to us (but remember, Jesus is in the middle of it and everything is happening all at once) -- that this was a *pernicious setup job*. Let me put it this way. If the woman was caught in the act of adultery, then so surely was the man? But there is no mention of the man in the story. He is nowhere to be found in the story. And furthermore, no one is asking about the man. It is the obvious question to ask, "Where is the other partner in this? It takes two to tango. Where's the man? How did he escape if the woman was caught?" But none of these questions is being asked. These accusers are not interested in justice for all. And they are not merely interested in the theoretical question as to what the punishment would be. This is not merely an academic exercise. They are bringing a person into this question, a real live person into this question, to embarrass her, to humiliate her and perhaps even to kill that person, this woman, standing before the crowd. They were willing to play with a human life as if this woman was a non-person, a non-human. This was a pernicious, setup job that surely must have outraged Jesus just as much as the second issue that probably crossed his mind that outraged him.

The second issue that would have come to mind as he thought about the way the accusers had phrased their question, was surely this: that these accusers in asking their question about the Law of Moses were deliberately misreading and taking out of context the words about adultery that were certainly to be found in the pages of the Law of Moses and in particular in the 20th chapter of the book of Leviticus. Let me put it this way. There is no question that when you go back to the Old Testament scripture, the Law of Moses is very harsh on *adultery*—the death penalty is for adultery—just as it was harsh on *homosexuality*—the death penalty is for homosexuality, AND just as it was harsh on . . . *dishonoring parents!!!* You curse your parents, and in Leviticus chapter 20, the same chapter as for adultery, it is the death penalty! No distinction is made. For all of them, together, the death penalty. And furthermore, what you find when you read the specific text about adultery, is that the woman’s accusers deliberately ignored the fact that even if it was the death penalty, it was the death penalty *for both* the man and the woman. Repeatedly in that section, even though the bible was written in days when the men were dominant, it is the death penalty not only for the woman but for the man -- again and again and again. So Leviticus 20, verses 9 and 10 read -- verse 9: “*All who curse father and mother shall be put to death.*” And verse 10, the very next verse—“*If a man commits adultery with the wife of his neighbor, both the adulterer and the adulteress shall be put to death.*”

So it is not impossible (and here is more speculation) that Jesus wrote in the ground some words like these: “*Find your friend, find the man, the guilty man, condemn him too, and then we will begin to speak about this woman whom you present before us.*”

Or, maybe, as he took his time, Jesus was thinking about the other scriptures that the accusers failed to mention, the other parts of scripture that they ignored. For example, the story about King David, the greatest king of ancient Israel, who committed adultery with Bathsheba -- and neither David nor Bathsheba was put to death. God did not always enforce this command to die (and so we, all of us having once been young and having disobeyed our parents, can breathe a sigh of relief on that!). God did not enforce the death penalty in the case of David and Bathsheba, even though David went on to another terrible thing -- to murder her husband, Uriah, causing him to be put to death.

Or what about those repeated passages of scripture, even in the Law of Moses, where we are told that God chooses mercy over judgement. Maybe as Jesus put his face down, maybe he wrote in the ground words from Exodus 34—“*The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.*” Whatever he wrote, Jesus was interested not just in proof texting or ripping parts of scripture out of context but in reading “the Book” as a whole. And thus he was far more interested, indeed, he was passionate, about redeeming people and renewing human lives and bringing people from death to life and not in condemning them.

And so in the fourth place, finally having realized (1) that this was a pernicious setup job, and having realized (2) that the accusers were misreading scripture, ripping it out of context and (3) having chosen to focus on the mercy of God and not God’s wrath, *Jesus began to redeem this woman’s life.*

And he did so by leveling the playing field, by increasing her odds of success at repentance and by getting the naysayers and the accusers, the legalists, to back off. And he did this, in his own good time, by lifting up his head and looking them in the eye, and by saying to them, "Let him who is without sin cast the first stone." And then he left them with the thought for a few moments, left them to think about it -- he bows his head and begins to doodle again in the sand. He waits in silence for the words to sink in. And what is interesting in this case, fascinating even, is that the words *do* sink in.

These scribes and Pharisees, even though they were doing something awful, were not "deep down bad people" with no consciences. They had a conscience; otherwise, Jesus' words would have fallen flat. They had a conscience, so they responded to Jesus' words. They were just people who were caught up in a "law and order movement," which often seems so right, so righteous, so divine, so proper, so holy . . . but which, in truth, often leads us to become pernicious and cruel. Indeed, along the way they were ignoring the over-arching reality with which we live: the weakness of all of us including *their own* weakness. They were ignoring the humanity of all of us, including their own humanity. And how easy that is to do, especially when we are indignant. And how often in recent years, in recent months, sadly, have we seen the super-righteous fall?

So Jesus' words were designed not only to protect the woman and to level the playing field but in a strange sense to redeem her accusers, and to restore their humanity, so that they would remember to speak truth to themselves about who they themselves were in the sight of the living God. John 8:7-11:

When they kept on questioning him (*DR: sort of like a mob action against him again and again*). He straightened up and said to them, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone" and once again he bent down and wrote on the ground. When they heard it, they went away one by one beginning with the elders and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. (*And now you see her environment was completely changed.*)

So Jesus straightened up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" She said, "No one, sir." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you. Go your way and from now on do not sin again."

Now let's be clear. Jesus is no way denying that the woman had sinned and failed: "From now on do not sin *again*." But far more important than condemning her, far more important than that, in dealing with her and in dealing with her accusers, Jesus created the environment, he provided the opportunity, for this woman to know her value, to live without fear, to change her ways and perhaps even for the first time in her life, to actually succeed.

A couple of weeks ago, I went with some of you who are here in this room today to a Girl Scout banquet, here in town. And it was a profound experience. Now I have been to many banquets such as this and not all of them are profound experiences: wonderful, but not profound! In this case, this was a profound experience, not just because the scouting movement, boys or girls, is a wonderful movement, but because I heard something that I had not heard before. I heard that for some young women in

scouting within our community and across the nation, what scouting does is to provide them with a powerful new environment for their lives that they might not otherwise have. Words like these kept coming up in the presentations —safety (which most of us take for granted), self-esteem, hope, skills, encouragement. All of these things are vital, and while most of us can take them for granted, some young people in our community cannot – and those involved in the leadership of Girl Scouts in our community are committed in a vital way to change the lives of young girls such as these. How vital it is, if people are to break out of the downward spiral of ignorance, of poverty or of simple self-destructive behavior, how vital it is to be able to experience a new environment; how vital it is to reach young lives before their own self-condemnation reaches them, and before what inevitably follows self-condemnation, before the condemnation of society as a whole.

That's what we have been called to do. That's what Jesus did. That's what this congregation has done through the years and that's what we must do in the years ahead.

- Lift people up, not push people down.
- Restore life, not always let death win the day.
- Redeem people, affirm standards yes, hold standards high yes, but while being gracious.

It is by no means easy to do. And it is not always what we want to do when we are pressed against the wall. It is not what we always feel like doing.

It takes time.

It takes thought.

It takes prayer.

It takes energy.

It takes slowing down.

It may take doodling in the ground.

It takes remembering.

It takes knowing scripture as a whole.

It takes into account our own humanity, our own weakness, our own need of help.

It takes keeping in mind Christ's unwavering love for us even when we do not deserve it.

It takes remembering the Apostle Paul's wonderful words to the Corinthians, reminding them and reminding us that it was for our sake, not just "theirs (those sinners)," it was for our sake that God made Jesus to be engulfed by our sin. Jesus who knew no sin, to become sin, that in him, that by him, that through him, we might become a new creation set free from death forever, agents of reconciliation, ambassadors of God, rightly related to God.

We are the beneficiaries of such good news as this. May we be the ambassadors of such good news as this to others in God's world.