Take Another Look

A meditation on John 8: 1 – 11

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Last week, as we worked with the parable of the rich fool, we explored the risks of trying to manipulate Jesus, manipulate God, for our purposes. This week, we hear, in this rather terrifying story, a warning about trying to trap Jesus in a theological puzzle. Every time someone tries to trip Jesus up, it backfires. Remember Wile E. Coyote of Looney Tunes fame? Wile E. Coyote was always devising complex contraptions to try to catch Roadrunner or Bugs Bunny. But the Acme exploding carrots would explode in his own face or the Acme anvil would fall on his own head, or his own feet would get stuck in the Acme glue. The religious leaders and teachers of the law never seem to learn that they can’t outsmart Jesus regarding the law. The law emerges from God, the giver of life. Whenever they try to catch Jesus in the complexities of the law with the intention of bringing down judgement, they will be caught, for the law was intended to give life, not end life.

If you don’t feel at least slightly uneasy, if not terrified, when you hear this story, then listen again. Who would not be horrified to be pulled out of bed, dumped in front of a group of their peers, and have their worst actions, their most damaging words, the hate, the lust, the greed, the jealousy, the pride, the whatever exposed for all to see.

The story is called “the woman caught in adultery.” That is how we know it, and that is how this nameless woman will always be remembered. Not as “the forgiven woman” or “the woman who received mercy,” but “the woman caught in adultery.” Where is *the man*? The church never seems to ask that question. It’s impossible for a woman to be “caught *in the very act of adultery*,” without there being a second person involved. Impossible. But this isn’t the story of “the couple caught in adultery; it is the woman’s shame. We shouldn’t be surprised by this. In a male dominated society, a culture in which women were generally subservient, the property of their fathers or spouses, we would expect that a blind eye might be turned toward the guilty man.

Jewish law, however, is just. Leviticus 20:20 reads, “If a man commits adultery with another man’s wife, *both the man and woman* shall be put to death.” Why in the world would these religious leaders say to Jesus “in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women.” (Did you catch that pejorative descriptor - “such women.” Again we ask, what about “such men”?) They know that are only presenting a portion of the law. They know the man is guilty, too. They know that the man also receives the death penalty. Have they chosen to ignore the portion of the law that is inconvenient for them? Are they hoping Jesus will go along with this half-truth? Picking and choosing what is “the law,” they place themselves above the law, and that is a sticky trap to set for themselves.

We need some context for this story of mercy and truth. If you go back and read chapter seven of John’s gospel, you will see that Jesus has come – in secret – to the Festival of Booths, one of the major Jewish festivals. Not so secretly, he begins teaching in the Temple, and the controversy begins. Some of the people are amazed at his words, and believe him to be the messiah. “When the Messiah comes, could he do greater miracles than this man?” they ask (v. 31). Other people are confused by him, and can’t believe he could be the Messiah because they say he came from Galilee. In the midst of all this confusion, the religious leaders are fuming because Jesus has not been trained in the law. He says startling things, such as:   
*“you circumcise a man on the Sabbath. If a man can be circumcised on the Sabbath without breaking Moses’ Law, why are you angry with me because I made an entire man well on the Sabbath? Don’t judge according to appearances. Judge with right judgment.” (John 7: 22b – 24)* Hold on to that little nugget of truth – you will need it again soon!

What a mess! The people are divided over Jesus’ identity, the religious leaders are anxious over his teachings, and Jesus is the calm at the eye of the storm. At the end of the day, everyone goes home. The people continue their conversations over their dinner tables. The religious leaders, whose attempts to have Jesus arrested that day have failed, go back to the drawing board to develop a new plan. Jesus leaves them with these words:

All who are thirsty should come to me!  
All who believe in me should drink!

As the scriptures said concerning me,  
*Rivers of living water will flow out from within him.”*

He then hikes up to the Mount of Olives, to rest, to pray, to prepare for another day.

In the morning he will return to the Temple to pick up his teaching where he left off, and that is when this story unfolds. This story of “the woman freed from adultery” didn’t make the first cut of John’s gospel. Scholars didn’t know what to do with it. Some early translations place it in Luke’s gospel, others insert it in the seventh chapter of John and still others place it in the twenty-first chapter. Thanks be to God that this story wasn’t lost, that this story was preserved with all of its mess and beauty.

Watch what Jesus does here because it is one of the simplest and yet most merciful actions anyone could do. It’s the kind of thing that any *of us* could do. These men interrupt Jesus’ teaching, dragging a woman “caught in the act” before him. They are using her to test Jesus on the law. She is the bait for the trap, but Jesus is too wise for that. “Standing her” in the midst of the crowd, they want Jesus to condemn her to death, “as the law demands.” Of course, the law demands death for the man, but, as we have said, they omitted that little detail. They are also aware that they could get Jesus in trouble with the Roman authorities if he does condemn her. So what should he do? Uphold the letter of the law and be arrested? Dismiss the law and be denounced by the scribes and Pharisees?

Jesus won’t play their game. He won’t fall for their tricks and traps. Jesus, moves from his seat, and kneels down in the dust. He begins to write – we don’t know what he wrote. Maybe he wrote the rest of the law in the dust – the part they left out about stoning the man! Maybe he put their most shameful moments on display for everyone to see. Maybe he doodled…his name? (Isn’t that the first thing you doodle?) Maybe he drew a cartoon in the dust. It’s fascinating to wonder about, but in the end, it doesn’t really matter. What matters is the action itself. In kneeling down and beginning to write or draw or doodle in the dust, Jesus drew their attention away from the woman. He drew their gaze off of her. Whether she was standing there with head held high in defiance of these men, or whether she was shaking and crying from shame, she would have wanted to be anywhere but there. She knew she was being used. In this simple action of pulling the focus off of her – something any of us could do for someone – Jesus saved her. He rescued her. He demonstrated his compassion for her. As much as any words he will say to her, this action demonstrated his compassion for her.

The religious leaders keep dropping their questions on his bowed head. Jesus continues to ignore them, continues to draw in the sand. And then he straightens up, looks at them and says that line we all know: “the one who is sinless may throw the first stone.” “If you are perfect, you may kill her.” With that simple statement hanging in the air, he kneels back down, directing his attention back to the sand. One by one, beginning with the elders, the men exit the scene. Without even lifting his head, Jesus can gaze around and see that there are no more sandals in his line of sight. The shuffling sounds have ceased. There is only one pair of feet before him. He stands up.

He looks into the woman’s eyes. “No one left to stone you?” he asks. “No, Lord,” she answers. “I don’t condemn you, either,” says Jesus. “Go and live a free life. Leave the sin behind and move forward.” She has been shamed enough. She has been humiliated enough. She has been threatened enough…by the powers of this world. Jesus sees no need to add to all that shaming and intimidation. The path to freedom begins with receiving and accepting mercy. What will she do with this new life which she has been offered? That is as much a mystery as the mystery of what Jesus wrote in the dust.

Hear this truth: judging others is a trap in which we can very easily become stuck. It will, more often than not, blow up in our faces. Because judging others pulls our attention away from examining our own souls, from uncovering our own shortcomings.

Jesus, the perfect one, had the authority and the ability to stone that woman had he chosen to do so. That option never crossed his mind. There is enough violence, enough condemnation, enough hatred and bitterness and vengeance to crush us all under its weight. Jesus offers another way. Which path will you choose?

*If you ever need a reminder of the extravagance of God’s mercy, read John 7: 53 – 8: 11. Place yourself in the role of the woman, Place yourself in the role of one of the religious leaders. Place yourself amidst the crowd.*