

5th Sunday of Lent, Year C The Women Caught in Adultery

John 8:1-11

¹ Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. ² But early in the morning he arrived again in the temple area, and all the people started coming to him, and he sat down and taught them. ³ Then the scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery and made her stand in the middle. ⁴ They said to him, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery." ⁵ Now in the law, Moses commanded us to stone such women. So what do you say?" ⁶ They said this to test him, so that they could have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and began to write on the ground with his finger. ⁷ But when they continued asking him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let the one among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." ⁸ Again he bent down and wrote on the ground. ⁹ And in response, they went away one by one, beginning with the elders. So he was left alone with the woman before him. ¹⁰ Then Jesus straightened up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" ¹¹ She replied, "No one, sir." Then Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you. Go, and from now on do not sin any more."

Introduction. The story focuses on the murderous impulse of "all the people" (v.2) when the scribes and Pharisees present "a woman who had been caught in adultery" (v.3).

The intention of the scribes and Pharisee was to simply use the woman and her circumstances "so that they could have some charge to bring against [Jesus]" (v.6) in order to fulfill their own murderous intent against Jesus (7:1). Their immediate goal is to trap Jesus between the requirements of the Law (*cf.* Lev 24:1-6 and Dt 13:10; 17:2-7) and his teaching of forgiveness and reconciliation. Will Jesus show himself to be a true son of Moses and do what the Law requires, i.e. agree that stoning the woman is the God-intended course of action? Will he defy the law and offer forgiveness.

The story unfolds in four stages:

- The Setting of the Scene (8:1-8:2)
- The Challenge of the Jewish Leaders (8:3-6)
- Jesus Response to the Leaders (8:7-9)
- Jesus' Reconciliation of the Woman (8:10-11)

The Setting of the Scene. In John 7 the Feast of Tabernacles is underway. Jesus has been publically teaching in the Temple precincts, arousing the interest of the people and the concern of the Jewish religious leadership. The leadership meets together, presumably took place on the last (and seventh) day of the feast. They are discussing what to do with Jesus – and murder seems to be on their minds (7:1). Early the next day, Jesus is coming early to the temple to teach on the morning of the added eighth day of the feast, which was a day of rest (Lev 23:39).

The Challenge of the Jewish Leaders. This stage of the story describes the challenge presented to Jesus by the Jewish leaders, but also infers things about their treatment of the woman, which is callous and demeaning. If she had committed adultery the previous evening, then have these opponents had been holding her during the night and waiting for Jesus to show up in order to use her to test him? Has been apprehended in the early hours of the

morning? In either case her fear would have been palpable. Putting her in the midst of the crowd would have added public humiliation.

The scene is a mixture of zealous righteousness that seeks to enact the law without pardon or quarter, the leadership who want to trap Jesus between mercy and the Law, and a woman caught in sin, fearing for her life. The Law commands a stoning to death as punishment for her transgressions. More precisely the law speaks of the death of both the man and the woman involved (Lev 20:10; Deut 22:22-24). The law makes it clear that stoning could only take place after a careful trial, which included the chance for the condemned to confess his or her wrong (*m. Sanhedrin* 6:1-4).

True righteousness would have some measure of concern for her soul. True righteousness would be free from deceitfulness, not hiding behind loyalty to Moses for other intentions. Since the law says both the man and the woman who commit adultery are to be killed, we are left wondering why the man was not brought in as well. It may be that he had escaped, but the fact that only the woman is brought raises suspicions and does not speak well of the true object of their zeal.

This situation is apparently just an attempt to entrap Jesus (v. 6). If he is lax toward the law, then he is condemned. But if he holds a strict line, then he has allowed them to prevail in their merciless treatment of this woman and has opened himself up to trouble from the Romans, for he will be held responsible if the stoning proceeds. The leaders of Israel are putting God to the test in the person of his Son, repeating the Israelites' historical pattern on more than one occasion in the wilderness at Meribah and Massah (Ex 17:2; Num 20:13; cf. Deut 6:16; Ps 95:8-9; 106:14).

Jesus Response to the Leaders. When he heard what the teachers of the law said, Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. Being seated as he was to teach, Jesus stooped down to write on the ground. This action has been variously interpreted. Some say Jesus was embarrassed to be confronted by a promiscuous woman (unlikely); others, that it was a ploy to gain time to think how best to answer. Again others have suggested it was a prophetic action modeled after Jeremiah 17:13. But the connection between Jesus' action and this text is slight. A better suggestion is that Jesus' action was a sign of his refusal to debate the issue on the terms dictated by the teachers of the law. This would account for their persistent questioning.

If his actions do echo Jer 17:13 ("Those who turn away from you shall be written in the earth, for they have forsaken the fountain of living water," perhaps "written in the earth" is the polar opposite of being written in the book of life (Ex 32:32; Dan 12:1). This scene focuses on the woman but is being spoken to all the people – now is the time for all to choose.

When the Pharisees and scribes keep on questioning him, Jesus straightened up and said to them, 'If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her.' According to the law, witnesses to a capital offence had to cast the first stone when the accused was condemned to death (Deut. 17:7). Jesus regarded the teachers of the law as witnesses to the offence. Therefore, they should begin the execution if it were to go ahead. But Jesus' words challenged the accusers, implying that none of them was without sin and therefore they were in no position to condemn this woman. What sin Jesus was implying they were guilty of is not clear. Perhaps they too were guilty of adultery. Perhaps they were malicious witnesses in terms of Deuteronomy 19:15-21, because they were not interested in seeing justice done, but

only in trapping Jesus. However, this is unlikely, because in Deuteronomy 19:15–21 the malicious witness is a false witness; the question of motive is not mentioned. Having said this, Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground. This is probably best understood as an indication that Jesus was refusing further debate. We are not told what Jesus actually wrote, so it is pointless to speculate. What he wrote plays no part in the story, because the teachers of the law, the crowd and the woman all responded to what Jesus said, not what he wrote. Therefore it did not need to be recorded.

An optimistic reading of Jesus' call for the one without sin to cast the first stone is "all the people" have been turned away from their murderous intentions onto the path of life as the withdraw to reflect on their own sinfulness before God. It has often been suggested that the eldest accusers were the first to leave (v. 9) because they recognized their own sinfulness more readily. However, leaving in this order may simply reflect the custom of deferring to the elders. In any case, their withdrawal was in fact a recognition of sin. Those who came to condemn ended up condemning themselves by not casting a stone.

Jesus is left alone, sitting on the ground, bent over and writing, with the woman standing before him. As Augustine says, "The two were left alone, *misera et misericordia*" ("a wretched woman and Mercy"; In John 33.5).

Jesus' Reconciliation of the Woman. This prepares for the fourth and final stage of this story--Jesus' response to the woman (vv. 10-11). He straightens up and asks for a report of what happened, as if he had been totally oblivious to what took place as he concentrated on his writing. He does not ask her about the charges but rather about that aspect of the situation most heartening to the woman: Where are they? Has no one condemned you? (v. 10).

But there is one left who could still execute the judgment--the only one present who was without sin and thus could throw the first stone. Is she hopeful at this point or still quite frightened? We can only speculate as to whether the woman was familiar with Jesus and his embodiment of the mercy of God. In any case, she becomes a memorable example of the fact that "*God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him*" (3:17). Jesus says to her, "*Neither do I condemn you. Go, and from now on do not sin any more*" (8:11). Jesus grants pardon, not acquittal. Here is mercy and righteousness. He condemned the sin and not the sinner (Augustine In John 33.6). But more than that, he called her to a new life. The gospel is not only the forgiveness of sins, but a new quality of life that overcomes the power of sin (cf. 8:32-36; 1 Jn 3:4-6).

The story is a succinct expression of the mercy of Jesus; a scene St Augustine captures as he writes, at the end, *relicti sunt duo, misera et misericordia* (there stand the two alone, misery and mercy). Reconciliation is not the result of a sinner's humiliation but the encounter of two persons. Without love, there is no forgiveness. With love, a whole new life is possible.

Notes

8:1 to the Mount of Olives: The parallel with the Lucan practice of Jesus' drawing aside for prayer in solitude is striking, cf. Luke 21:37 – "*During the day, Jesus was teaching in the temple area, but at night he would leave and stay at the place called the Mount of Olives.*"

8:2 in the temple area...all the people: The parallel with Luke 21:37 continues. Notably, Luke 21:38 reads "*And all the people would get up early each morning to listen to him in the temple area.*"

8:3 the scribes and Pharisee: this grouping of opponents is found only here in John although it is a common feature of the synoptic gospels

a woman who had been caught in adultery: the Greek makes it clear that the woman was found *in flagranti*, in the very act (v.4). Some commentators opine that this was perhaps all a ruse and the woman an accomplice in the scheme. The text is clear in vv.3,4 that this is not a play acted out for “all the people.” The implication is that this woman is married. Adultery in the Law was, for the most part, concerned with the faithfulness of the wife. Nothing is mentioned of her lover who must have escape – or been let go.

and made her stand in the middle: if indeed the woman was caught *in flagranti*, then one can easily imagine the woman if disheveled, distressed, and perhaps not completely dressed. Although the woman is “in the middle” of Jesus, the scribes and Pharisees, and all the people, she has no part in the dialogue. This makes even more striking Jesus’ later dialogue with her in vv.10-11. This is also the posture of the accused in a communal judicial setting.

8:4 Teacher: this recognition of Jesus’ status sets the tone of the debate – whose teaching are authentic

8:5 So, what do you say?: The details of the woman’s marital status is not provided. If she was married or betrothed, the punishment was death (Lev 20:10 and Deut 22:22 mention death but without the modality of execution, but Deut 22:23–24 prescribes stoning for a betrothed virgin). The adulterer and the guilty woman, if caught in the act, are to be punished by death (Dt. 22:22), since the covenant with the holy God demands the rooting out of everything evil from within Israel.

8:6 Jesus bent down and began to write on the ground with his finger: There is no consensus on what the posture or the action mean. Many see it as a symbolic reference to Jer 17:13 in which those who turn away from the Lord shall be recorded in the earth as they have forsaken the fountain of living water (possible internal reference to John 4:10 *ff.* as well as a more immediate reference back to John 7:38: “Whoever believes in me, as scripture says: ‘Rivers of living water will flow from within him.’”). One can also argue that in the face of v.10, there is no judgment being offered at all. Yet the Jeremiah text’s reference to (*lit.*) “withdrawing” is highly provocative given the departure of the scribes, Pharisees and people in v.9.

There is speculation about what was written. A tradition that goes back to St Jerome and which later appeared in 10th century Armenian gospel manuscript is that Jesus wrote the sins of the accusers. Given that this pericope appears in the midst of a section of John which is concerned with the identity of Jesus, some scholars have proposed this is a symbolic action echoing Dan 5:24 *ff.* in which the finger of the divine writes judgment upon the king of Babylon. Other suggest Jeremiah 17:13, ““Those who turn away from you shall be written in the earth, for they have forsaken the fountain of living water.” These are other suggestions, but each faces the problem that the passage simply lacks a referent, and thus it could be divine judgment or divine doodling.

8:7 Let the one among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her: These words reflect Lv 24:1-16; Dt 13:10; and 17:2-7 (where the witness should throw the first stone).

8:9 they went away: If this were a simple conflict story, then the account would end as the opponent withdraw. But story continues, pointing to its real intent – the encounter with the woman.

8:11 Go, (and) from now on do not sin any more: πορεύου, [καὶ] ἀπὸ τοῦ νῦν μηκέτι ἀμάρτανε. Literally, “Go, [and] away from this time no longer sin.” Many translations do not include ἀπὸ τοῦ νῦν (from this time) as a superfluous addition to the meaning. But the words are significant. Jesus is pinpointing the turning point in this woman’s life, a life giving point – literally and salvifically. She must not fall back into a way that leads to death.

Sources

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