

Gospel of John #12
The Woman Caught in Adultery
John 8:1-20

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We'll start where Michael left off last week in John 7:53: I think he said "There's a boulder rolling down the mountain and I'll let Sue talk about it next week."

The boulder is that at the end of John 7, there is a veracity question because John 7:53-8:11 is a part of the book of John that is not found in the earliest transcripts. The Holy Spirit breathes inspiration and people speak it; then they hand it off to others and others speak it and tend to the words. The Holy Spirit is always collaborating with people to spread the word of God. Until the 1600s, scripture was hand-written. When the scribes wrote things down, they sometimes had questions: was this here before? Is this written accurately? Biblical scholars must pay attention to passages like this. However, the voice of the church and the Holy Spirit confirm that what we have is God-inspired. Today, I invite you not to stand in judgment over this passage but instead to sit under this teaching as a disciple and a student.

Another question about this passage is that it has moved around: it sometimes shows up in Luke or other places in John. I think, however, this passage fits here and I'll explain why,

When we face boulders like this, we also explore whether it fits with Scripture and whether it's historical. Scholars agree this is historical because people talked about this encounter with Jesus and this woman elsewhere.

Are you ready to step in here as disciples?

The title for this sermon is "**The Woman Caught in Adultery.**" This is only part of the story because it's about other things as well. What is a Midkid definition of adultery? I'm cautious because so many of us have been impacted by this in many different ways. The first thing I say to you is that this story ends well.

A man and a woman in a covenant marriage carry out their promises to one another which creates a boundary around them to receive and pour out blessings to each other and the world. If a person from a covenant marriage gets together with a person from another covenant marriage and they try to create a new covenant marriage, this messes things up.

Likewise, when we make covenants with God, the boundary it creates blesses us. Marriage points to this: I think this is why the consequences of adultery and idolatry are similar. Both create idols and cause us to hang out with false gods and damage our covenant with God.

Covenant is the topic for today: the places where God invites us to live in certain ways. We don't always keep these so we need to look at what restoration looks like.

John 7: 53 And each one departed to his own house.

John 8:1 but Jesus went to the Mount of Olives.

2 At dawn he appeared again in the temple courts, where all the people gathered around him, and he sat down to teach them.

This is a beautiful moment: let's zoom way out to the panoramic view of the place where Jesus hung out with his disciples. In this passage, Jesus is going "home" to pray with God the Father on the mountain. He wakes up in a garden the next day: this alludes back to the garden. Next, He steps into the temple to hold court with his people. Actually, Jesus steps in as the king who rules kindly and gently. He doesn't look like a king but John sees it and invites us to see it, too. Jesus is about to hold court with the Pharisees who think they have a trap for Jesus. But really, it's a case for a king like Solomon to decide, but the Pharisees don't know it.

3 The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery.

Notice how the mood shifts: trouble is brewing.

They made her stand before the group **4** and said to Jesus, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. **5** In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" **6** They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him.

Let's take a step back from this trap and consider the emotions that have suddenly arrived on the scene: the woman has been caught red-handed and dragged into a public space. She was feeling shame and terror and anger. Connect these with some of your own emotions: when was a time that my wrong doing was exposed in public? For me, once in 7th grade, my teacher lit into me in front of others over something I said. I was confused, exposed, and worried over how I would fix this. Imagine watching others pick up rocks and getting ready to throw them at you.

In contrast, the Pharisees may have been feeling confidence, pride, glee, and self-righteousness. Can you think of times in your life where you did something like this? For me, sometimes at work, I observe when by protocols not followed and I might complain to a coworker. But the finger comes back at me: I inevitably get caught doing the same things. I might feel angry at first. This is what it's like to be a Pharisee. They want to take Jesus down, yet they might be feeling a little guilty over their trap which actually dishonors the Mosaic law they claim to follow.

John lets us, the readers, know it's a trap. Let's look at this particular law in the Old Testament:

Lev 20:10 If a man commits adultery with his neighbor's wife, both the adulterer and the adulteress must be put to death.

So in John 8, where is the man? Something is fishy...notice that Jesus doesn't address this but wants to address their hearts. What does Jesus do?

John 8:7 But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger.

We have seen a finger writing text before in the Ten Commandments.

Ex 31:18 He gave Moses two tablets of testimony when he had finished speaking with him on Mount Sinai, tablets of stone written by the finger of God.

Maybe, by writing in the dirt, Jesus is saying he has the right to interpret this law!

Have you been in crowds? Things can go bad quickly. What if people had decided to enact justice on this woman? This would have been a problem because the Jews weren't allowed to enact capital punishment. But if Jesus pardons the woman, he loses credibility because he fails to uphold the law.

Have you ever written on the ground? I have childhood memories of this: when I did it, I was in charge! I was drawing the map to the treasure, I was telling a story with stick figures. It's very visceral involving the whole body. But there is evidence that teachers at this time would use the ground to explain things. It was the original whiteboard! We don't know if Jesus was acting like a child or a teacher. Apparently, he doesn't write the answer because they keep asking him:

7 When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." **8** Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground.

Notice that Jesus springs the trap here: he takes the judgment given to him and hands it back with an important caveat: He tells them if they haven't sinned, then they can go ahead and get this started. They must evaluate their own hearts. Notice that He doesn't say the law *doesn't* matter; it's intended to shine on each person's heart. He doesn't wait for an answer:

9 At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there.

I love that John mentions the *older* people leave first: the ones who have had more time to sin and realize their sin.

10 Jesus straightened up and asked her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?"

Notice that this is the first thing he said to the woman; until now, she is only an object. No one, in fact, has talked to her yet in this passage.

11 “No one, sir,” she said.

“Then neither do I condemn you,” Jesus declared. “Go now and leave your life of sin.”

This is crazy beautiful! Jesus says he is the only one who has the authority to condemn her! He says she can live a new life instead of taking on the identity of the thing she did. You, likewise, can be known for “dumb” things you did decades ago! This woman is the “adulteress” but Jesus says who she is now has nothing to do with who she will be. There is no expectation that she needs to stay the way she has been. I love this!

Let’s look at the actions in this passage that Jesus takes with his body: His words AND his actions are important.

A view from far away: Imagine in this passage that you are sitting at the edge of the crowd and you can’t hear things well. From your point of view, you see a wall of Pharisees with the woman. You also see Jesus but then he disappears from view. Then he stands up and speaks and then disappears again. Then everyone leaves, one at a time, and Jesus is alone with the woman; then she leaves. From far away, it looks like Jesus is the victor as he goes down and up and changes the situation. At the end, he remains and everyone else leaves.

The Pharisees don’t push back on Jesus’s directions: they have enough humility to know they aren’t without sins. They leave as disciples, in a sense. They don’t all stay repentant but it’s possible that some did: the invitation is there.

A close up view: John tells the story from this view. He shows us what happens with the eyes: Think about the people close enough to hear Jesus. The woman is on one side, probably looking at the ground. Shame doesn’t want people looking at us. When Jesus drops to the ground the first time, all eyes go on him. When he stands up, the gaze moves to people’s own hearts. He drops to the ground again, and this time his gaze catches the woman’s gaze: this is a gaze of love, the only one that remains. This is the gaze I want to remain in!

What if? Let’s go back to our covenant with God: Let’s ask what would happen if we believed not just that Jesus was who he says he was but that he could fill all the shameful, angry, proud spaces in our stories. When we ask Jesus, “How do you see me?” and hear Him say, “I don’t condemn you.” What if this frees us up to be something else? What if in all the places in our lives where we function like Pharisees and all the places where we accuse others, Jesus asks us, “Are you free?” and I walk away. What about all the places where we try to trap Jesus? What

if we and everyone else could walk away changed? How would our lives, the world, change if this happened?