

WHAT DOES JESUS DO WITH STONES?

JOHN 8:2-11

LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH

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The best stories, like the best jokes, interpret themselves.

The best stories don't require a whole lot of explanation. And our story this morning is, in my opinion, one of the very best stories in all of Scripture.

It's one of those stories where it's easy to feel like perhaps the less said by way of "explanation," the better.

In many ways, the gospel has already been preached simply in the telling of this story. So, rather than me spending these next 15 min or so *explaining* it, I simply want to offer a few reflections, and perhaps invite us to sit with the story in a more intentional way.

We have a bunch of righteous religious folks with stones in hand who drag a "sinful" adulterous woman before Jesus. They armed with the law of Moses in one hand and a generous dose of self-righteousness in the other.

Teacher... (always good to begin with a bit of false flattery) This woman was caught in the act of adultery. The Law of Moses commanded us to stone such women...

(They're right, actually. In both Leviticus 20:10 and Deuteronomy 22:22-24, but the Pharisees seem to have little interest in the fact that the Law commands that **both** parties to the adultery are to meet the same fate!)

*Now. What do **you** say?*

The Pharisees are hungry for judgment, whether it turns out to be of Jesus or the woman.

Either way, it seems that their hunger will be sated.

Either Jesus will have to agree with their assessment of the Law, and the woman will be put to death, *or*, Jesus will, as they suspect, side with the woman and with mercy thereby demonstrating with his callous disregard for the Law of Moses that all of his claims to be Israel's Messiah are false.

As I was reading this passage this week, I thought of the prophet Jonah's comical response to God's response of mercy to the Ninevites, after Jonah had reluctantly gone to the city to preach to them. We see Jonah moping on the hillside, complaining that it was just as he expected—God was so darn *merciful* (Jonah 4:1-3)!

It's so annoying when God insists on being merciful to the people that you would like to see judged!

The Pharisees know that this is what Jesus is like. But what will he do when he is faced with a choice like this? What will he do when the Law *very clearly states....* ?

Well, we know what Jesus does.

He refuses to play their games.

Fire away, Jesus says. Let loose your stones, provided that you are without sin.

And they all trudge angrily away.

And then we see this tender moment between Jesus and the woman.

Has no one condemned you? he asks. *Then neither do I. Go and leave your sin, live the life you were created for.*

I love Jesus for his response here—not only for what he *says* but for what he *does*.

Let's observe Jesus actions.

For starters, it says the Pharisees *made the woman stand...* We can imagine the woman was ashamed, that she wanted to hide, that she wanted to be invisible. But *they made her stand before the group...*

And what does Jesus do? He bends down low.

It's quite a symbolically powerful moment, isn't it? Jesus, the one in whom God *bends down* to his people, the one in whom God *empties himself, becoming nothing...*

NT scholar Willard Swartley tells the story of a Korean student who once suggested that in bending over, perhaps Jesus was taking the attention off the woman and dignifying her.

We don't know precisely why Jesus bent down, but we *do* know that rather than picking up stones, he begins to write something in the dust. But what?

People have endlessly wondered about this.

Was it examples of the Pharisees' sins? Was it the Ten Commandments? Was he just doodling?

Or, perhaps it wasn't *what* he was writing, but *that* he was writing.

I think the most compelling explanation of what Jesus might have been up to with his mysterious actions here comes out of Jeremiah 17.

The context is a prophetic judgment against the people of Israel for their idolatry, for their gaining of wealth by unjust means, for trusting in the ways of men rather than the ways of God, and in general for having hearts *turned away from the Lord*.

After a long section recounting these sins, Jeremiah says these words:

O LORD, the hope of Israel!
All who forsake you shall be put to shame.
Those who turn away from you
shall be written in the dust,
for they have forsaken the LORD,
the fountain of living water.

–Jeremiah 17:13

Those who turn away from you shall be written in the dust.

The Pharisees would have known Jeremiah 17 very well. And Jesus would have *known* that the Pharisees knew this very well.

Is it possible that in bending over and writing in the ground in response to the Pharisees eager desire for the letter of the Law rather than mercy, that Jesus was saying, “THIS IS YOU. You have forsaken the fountain of living water. You have turned away from the Lord. You are eager to render judgment and slow to follow the Lord who is described in the same Law you are so eager to use as a weapon, as “gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love and faithfulness (Exodus 34:6).”

Is it possible that in writing on the ground, Jesus was saying to the Pharisees, “if you persist in these ways, you will be written in the dust?”

We don't know.

But we *do* know that whatever Jesus was doing, instead of bending over to pick up stones, Jesus bends over to rebuke them for their eagerness to sacrifice this woman on the altar of their piety, and to point the woman's accusers to a deep truth about God.

And what is this deep truth about God?

Jesus summarizes it quite well in another encounter with Pharisees in Matthew 9.

Again, they are complaining, this time about the sorts of people that Jesus is eating with the wrong sorts of people. *Sinners* and *tax collectors*.

Jesus, quoting the prophet Hosea says to them, “But go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice’ (Matthew 9:13).

I desire *mercy*, not sacrifice.

This story does not mean, as so many are pleased to think, that Jesus is *tolerant*. This is a word unworthy of Jesus.

This story is not saying that we must never talk about sin or call people to holiness.

One of the most incredible things about Jesus' last words to the woman is how they preserve both mercy **and** deep convictions about holiness.

Jesus doesn't say to the woman, "Go now and be true to yourself." He doesn't say, "Go now, and do whatever floats your boat." He doesn't say, "Go now, as you were, and know that God will never judge you."

He doesn't say any of those things. Instead, he says, "Go, leave your life of sin." He honours the woman by showing her that she is a moral being capable of making better choices. And that the choices she makes *matter*.

He does the same for each of us.

BUT. There is one crucial thing that we must never forget.

We are not Jesus.

Our judgments inevitably veer away from mercy and toward sacrifice. We sacrifice others on the altars of our need to be vindicated, to be proved right, to be thought superior, to have our theological categories preserved. The list goes on and on.

Church history is, regrettably, filled with examples of people who have desired sacrifice and not mercy. Far too many people have only heard from the church, "Go leave your life of sin," but never "I do not condemn you."

We are not Jesus.

Jesus is the one human being who could have said, in response to the challenge he gave to the Pharisees—*Let anyone who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her*—

Well, I *am* without sin. I *do* have the right to condemn you.

In keeping with the Law, Jesus *could* have bent over to pick up a stone—he is the only one who could have.

But he didn't.

And if Jesus, the only one who could legitimately throw stones of condemnation refuses to do so, how much more should we, who are *not* Jesus, always err on the side of mercy?

Whenever the church opens its mouth about sin, our words must always be marinated in mercy. **Because we are *all* in need of mercy.**

James, the brother of Jesus puts it this way:

Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom, because **judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment** (James 2:12-14).

Earlier, I said that the best stories interpret themselves. The best stories also tell *our* own stories.

It doesn't take too much gazing into the mirror to realize that we, too, like the woman dragged before Jesus, have been caught in the act.

Caught in our sin and selfishness. Caught in the thickets we so often create for ourselves.

Caught in the broader systems and stories that our individual stories are but smaller parts of.

Caught and dragged before the tribunals of truth and moral rectitude, caught with little to say in our defense.

And how profoundly liberating to stand beside this Jesus who sends our critics packing with a few simple words, this Jesus who looks us in the eye and says, "Where are your accusers?"

How deeply comforting and dignifying to see this Jesus straighten us up and say,

Neither do I condemn you. Now go, and leave your sin. Live the life that you were created for.

Amen.

