

John 7:45-8:11
May 7, 2023
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Throwing Stones or Doodling in the Dirt

Today we begin a month-long sermon series entitled, “Misquoted: Things Jesus Didn’t Say.” As I mentioned in my newsletter article this past week:

Sadly, there are occasions when the grace that saves us gets lost or turned around as we carry it out into the world. Each Sunday in May, we will explore some of the sayings that are either mis-attributed to Jesus or held up as gospel by the larger culture, and even occasionally by us.

This morning’s thing Jesus didn’t say is “Hate the sin; love the sinner.” And our text is one of the most familiar stories about Jesus. If you follow along in your bible, you may see this story is bracketed, meaning it doesn’t show up in this spot in every ancient copy of John’s gospel. It is instead what Dr. Frances Taylor Gench calls a “homeless story,” because over time it has been placed in other parts of John’s gospel and occasionally in Luke’s. Dr. Gench and others agree that this story—homeless as it may be—is true to the Jesus the early church knew and followed. The earliest church shared this story long before it was written down because it reveals something important about Jesus and about the community that claims him as savior and Lord.

In John’s gospel, Jesus spends a fair amount of time in the Temple in Jerusalem teaching and rattling the religious leaders. At this point in the narrative, Jesus has changed water into wine, fed thousands on a hillside, healed many, and held a conversation in broad daylight with a Samaritan woman. He has also had a late-night visit with a Pharisee named Nicodemus. Nicodemus seemingly comes to Jesus with genuine curiosity. He recognizes that Jesus is a

teacher who comes from God, and he comes to Jesus wondering aloud about what it means to be born again or from above. In the wake of Jesus' teaching, preaching, healing, and feeding, we hear that the crowd in the Temple is divided over what to make of him and what to do with him.

[Read John 7:45-8:11]

We are never told her name. She is known throughout the centuries as the woman caught in adultery, identified by her worst moment, at least in headings added later by bible publishers. And yet there is so much more to this story than the salacious details we are tempted to fill in from our own imaginations. Here is what we know:

Tensions are running high around this rabbi from Galilee.

Jesus has captured the attention of crowds and religious leaders who are quickly developing their own opinions about who he is and what he is up to.

Some of the leaders who view Jesus as a threat are eager to entrap him so that they have an excuse to get him out of the way.

An unnamed woman is paraded before him so that he can weigh in on her fate, perhaps sealing his own.

We are not told what it means that she was caught in the act, nor are we told who exactly she was caught with or where he might be at the moment.

It all seems so sordid, so ugly. It sounds almost like an episode of Jerry Springer or *Gossip Girl* or *The Guiding Light*. And Jesus doesn't flinch. Instead, he crouches down and writes in the dirt.

We don't know what Jesus writes. Dr. Gench mentions that during a bible study on this text, one participant joked that Jesus writes, "It takes two!"¹ Scholars and others have

¹ Frances Taylor Gench, *Encounters with Jesus: Studies in the Gospel of John*, 81.

speculated for centuries about what exactly Jesus inscribes. I'm not sure it matters, because the power is in his posture. He does not stand with the accusers against the woman who seem to care less about her and more about how they can use her transgression as a weapon against this troublesome rabbi from Galilee of all places. He does not wag his finger at them or at her. He does not stand with arms folded defensively rocked back on his heels. No, he crouches down and scribbles something on the ground, taking the wind out of their sails and the bluster out of the confrontation. They push him to respond with a yes or no answer, and instead he makes them wait while he shifts his posture.

Words matter. Posture does, too. A few years ago, it was recommended that women (and perhaps men, too) entering a contentious meeting would benefit from pausing for a few deep breaths and striking the Wonder Woman pose: feet hip distance apart, fists on hips, chin up. The stance sends a signal to our brains or our central nervous system or simply our psyches that we are capable and worthy of being listened to. And yes, when my nerves have started to get the best of me, I've tried it. Posture matters. We walk differently when we step onto the football field than we do when we walk into a nursery. And as I watched King Charles's coronation yesterday, I was struck by the different times people knelt before one another as a sign of service or deference. There were bows and curtsies, of course. Heads were bowed in prayer and before the cross. And 5-year-old Prince Louis yawned and squirmed a bit, too.

When I picture this story, I imagine the woman with her head bowed in shame, the leaders puffed up with their chins set and their shoulders raised, and then there is Jesus. He is already seated, the traditional posture for a teacher. He refuses to stand with the agitated leaders, and he also refuses to cower. He assumes a different posture. And he refuses to settle

for something as simplistic as, “Hate the sin; love the sinner.” He does not argue that the woman has not sinned. We can safely assume that she has in fact broken the Law in some way. As my friend and colleague, Joe Clifford reminds me, Jesus tells them to go ahead and stone her. He says, “Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” *Go ahead. Throw stones...if you have no reason to have stones thrown at you.*

As we often remind one another, all have sinned. All far short of the glory of God. All means all. It’s not a matter of dividing ourselves up into sinners and non-sinners. It does not work that way. And as difficult as it may be to believe, this is good news. In his stooping, in his writing, in his adamant refusal to pick sides, Jesus disarms all of them and all of us. The woman is no longer isolated as the only one who falls short. The crowd and the leaders are confronted with their own falling short. For a brief moment judgmentalism is off the table. No one throws a single stone.

Church historian Roberta Bondi views judgmentalism as one of the most destructive threats to the life and witness of the Christian community:

Judgmentalism destroys community, it destroys those who do the judging, and, even more seriously . . . , it often destroys (and certainly excludes from community) the one who is judged. On a small scale judgmentalism destroys marriages, families, and churches. On a wider scale it provides the major fuel of racism, sexism, neglect of the poor, and national self-righteousness. Judgmentalism for this reason as a breach of love is as serious as any other sin we might commit against one another.²

² Roberta C. Bondi, *To Pray and to Love: Conversations on Prayer with the Early Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 109, as cited by Frances Taylor Gench.

And yet, when we are confronted with our own sinfulness, there is hope for healing on a personal level and as a community as we recognize that we are sinners, too, and that sin is woven into every aspect of our beings. We cannot set aside our sins like taking off an old coat. We need help. We ALL need help. Such a recognition is humbling. And in our humility, we might just be able to offer a healing presence in the larger world. The world around us is unraveling at breathtaking speed. Hatred and vengeance come at us in waves like a never-ending high tide on a storm-tossed beach. We are so quick to resort to hateful rhetoric and revenge. We are so quick to pick up not simply pebbles but boulders. And we are so astonishingly quick to hurl them. And sadly, many of those who are quick to throw stones worship the same God I do and follow the same Lord. And it is easy and seductive to fall in line, until someone blessedly steps in, or stoops down and doodles in the dirt.

The bible study participant who suggested, “It takes two!” is not wrong.³ Ancient Jewish law called for both the woman and the man to be stoned. But it actually takes more than two. More than two have sinned here. There is ample sinfulness to go around. There still is today, and as I said earlier, that is good news, or it can be, if we are able to hear it. Dr. Bondi writes:

Cultivating the virtue of seeing ourselves as sinners is a major source of healing the wounds of judgmentalism in our hearts. . . . [K]nowing that I am a sinner means taking seriously the knowledge that we all do or at least are capable of terrible things. The monastic teachers were quite certain that it is not possible to love other people unless

³ Gench, 81.

we understand at a very deep level that our human failings in the area of love put us all in the same boat.⁴

Dr. Gench builds on Dr. Bondi's point:

To know ourselves as sinners, and thereby to heal our judgmental hearts, would appear to be foundational to our ability to extend ourselves in love and compassion to others, and perhaps also to ourselves. We share a common human struggle with sin, and are indeed all in the same boat—equally reliant on God's grace.⁵

Equally reliant on God's grace. Equally. All. If we are saved it is by grace alone. We have all sinned, and we are *all* saved by grace.

Jesus does not say to love the sinner and hate the sin; nor does he say, "Live and let live." This is not a question of anything goes. There is not one among us who could throw the stone when invited. All have sinned. All fall short. Jesus encourages the woman to let go of her past failings and invites her into a new beginning. He invites the others to begin again, too. Not everyone will listen. Some will insist on clutching their stones. Some will fixate on their next chance to hurl those stones at another sinner in another place at another time. I can't make them drop their stones. I can however opt to live differently. I can pause, take a breath, and stoop down for a moment. Or at least pay closer attention to the one who stoops and scribbles first. And then I might be able to drop the stone I've clutched so tightly and—by the grace of God—I just may be able to open my ears and my heart to hear his grace-filled invitation to start again.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

⁴ Bondi, 112, as cited by Gench. Italics added by Dr. Gench.

⁵ Gench, 91.