

John 8:1-11

¹⁻² Jesus went across to Mount Olives, but he was soon back in the Temple again. Swarms of people came to him. He sat down and taught them.

³⁻⁶ The religion scholars and Pharisees led in a woman who had been caught in an act of adultery. They stood her in plain sight of everyone and said, “Teacher, this woman was caught red-handed in the act of adultery. Moses, in the Law, gives orders to stone such persons. What do you say?” They were trying to trap him into saying something incriminating so they could bring charges against him.

⁶⁻⁸ Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger in the dirt. They kept at him, badgering him. He straightened up and said, “The sinless one among you, go first: Throw the stone.” Bending down again, he wrote some more in the dirt.

⁹⁻¹⁰ Hearing that, they walked away, one after another, beginning with the oldest. The woman was left alone. Jesus stood up and spoke to her. “Woman, where are they? Does no one condemn you?”

¹¹ “No one, Master.”

“Neither do I,” said Jesus. “Go on your way. From now on, don’t sin.”

Christ, Christians, and the Culture Wars

This story is so familiar and so well-loved by Christians. It’s one of those stories that we ought to tell again and again because we either fail to understand it properly or we fail to apply what it teaches us to our daily lives. Today I want to look at this story and see how we may not be getting everything out of this story that we ought to get out of it.

And first let me tell you that this is not intended to be a “good guy / bad guy” story. We’re in this worship series about seeing gray in a world of black and white, and this is precisely one of those stories that we too often see in terms of black and white. We start off on the right track; our heart goes out to this poor woman who was pulled out of someone’s bedroom, brought to trial publically, and stands a pretty good chance of being executed according the law on adultery. It’s good for us to feel compassion for this very frightened and humiliated woman. But then our black and white minds immediately paint these people who accost her in the most negative light. We see them as primitive, as hypocritical, as self-righteous, and as bloodthirsty, and so we have just obscured the message that Jesus is trying to convey to us. All we’ve done is shifted our judgmental minds away from the adulterous woman and directed our scorn instead on the religious scholars and the Pharisees. We’ve just started cheering for the underdog, but we haven’t got the point of the story. We’ve just become another mob of people who instead of going after a woman caught in the act of adultery is instead dragging these legal experts before Jesus. We’ve got the stones in our hands and we’re ready to clobber them.

But stop for a second and think about those “bad guys.” Are they really so bad? We all likely agree that adultery should not be a capital offense, but it’s still against the law in 21 states, and it’s a felony in five of those states. Even in states where it’s not against the law, most of us would also agree that it’s a horrible sin, and if your spouse were guilty of adultery, would it be so easy for you to drop your stone and walk away, or to forgive? I believe that our lax scruples with regards to adultery have led to the disintegration of our moral integrity in this nation; surveys

have estimated that 50% of men and 26% of women *admit* to having extramarital affairs at least once in their lives, and who's to say how many *don't* admit it? Seeing gray means that we are able understand the anger of those people holding the stones. It's not just about the spouses of the guilty party; it's about the well intentioned men and women who care about the culture, the disintegration of family values. They have good reason to be angry. They have good reason to want to punish the guilty party, to discourage such behavior.

And the passage says that these folks are really upset with Jesus because he seems to be too lax when it comes to enforcing laws. He's healed on the Sabbath and he's forgiven people without requiring them to go through the customary ritual for obtaining forgiveness. This group of men is challenging Jesus to make his position on the sin of adultery perfectly clear to them. Is Jesus so morally lax that he's going to excuse this woman's behavior and thus threaten the social fabric that binds the Jewish people together as community? Is he going to rewrite the Law of Moses, to turn adultery in a misdemeanor? Is he going to compromise the word of God as these men and the scholars who preceded them have understood it?

And this story of this woman caught in adultery serves as a great example of a culture war that we are engaged in today. When it comes to issues like abortion or gay rights or immigration or the war in Iraq, the core of the argument is a concern for the community and the values that community has come to embrace. Even though women have been having abortions from the beginning of time, there is concern among many that sex is taken far too casually, and that sex between anyone other than one man and one woman was an abomination and that the main reason people married was to have children. It was a blessing to be pregnant; it was good news, not bad, to discover that you were with child. Gay rights and women's reproductive rights threaten those conceptions of civil order, as does illegal immigration; how are all these strangers going to affect our community, our idea of right and wrong? We fear both the erosion of our values – the thought of drug traffickers moving in down the block – as well as people imposing values on us that we don't share – I've heard people express concern that Muslims might impose Sharia Law on our communities. I think about the culture that Jesus grew up in. Jews were very proud of their identity – about their race as well as their values and their religion. They despised both the Samaritans and the Romans and the Jews who seemed to compromise their values by adopting the Roman way of life. These were the culture wars that went on in Jesus' day, and they're no different from the ones that we fight today.

So how do we as Christians approach these culture wars? Well once again we need to take our cue from Jesus. Notice how he handles the situation in today's reading. Jesus does not dismiss the Law; he declares that not one iota of the Law will disappear until all in heaven and earth are accomplished. Jesus is not soft on crime. He does not tell this crowd to dismiss charges and let this woman go free. But what Jesus *does* do is put things in perspective. "Okay, folks; whoever is righteous, you throw the first stone." Jesus is big on *humility*. He told us to look first at that log in our own eye before pointing out the *speck* in someone else's. People often wonder what Jesus was writing in the dirt while this group of men was waiting for his answer. I wonder if it was the names of all the hottest celebrities in Jerusalem at the time, the Angelina Jolies, the Marilyn Monroes, the Ingrid Bergman's of the day. And these guys were seeing those names and maybe reflecting on something Jesus had said earlier, "If you even look at a woman with lustful intent, *you have committed adultery in your heart*. Not to say that thinking about a crime is the same as

actually committing the crime, but *recognizing that the thought is there* should humble us, help us see our own potential for doing horrible things, and thus help us recognize our own need for redemption. Jesus does not tell us to relax our enforcement of the law but to enforce them with humility. How many traffic police have driven over the speed limit without an excuse? How many pastors have spoken ill of a church member behind that person's back? How many of us have lied to avoid getting in trouble while we criticize others who get caught in their lies? Jesus is reminding us, in our zeal to preserve our culture and maintain law and order, that none of us are perfect.

And this opens us all up to grace, a grace that we so desperately need. I'm reminded of *Les Miserables*, how Jean Valjean, a convict just released from prison, is given food and rest at a church, steals the silverware, and when he's caught and brought back to the church with the stolen goods, Bishop Myriel tells the police that he *gave* Jean Valjean the silverware, then gives Valjean two silver candlesticks and says, "You forgot to take these." This was the grace that Jean Valjean needed to turn his life around. It's the same grace that we see in our Scripture passage; after the crowd disperses and the woman is left alone with no one left to condemn her, Jesus says, "Neither do I condemn you. Go on your way. And from now on don't sin."

And we should recognize just how much grace God extends to all of us; how many times have I heard Jesus say, "I don't condemn you. Go on your way. And by the way, from now on don't sin"?

I believe that as Christians we have a mission to uphold standards in our family and in our community, even in our nation and in the world – we've often sent people and resources overseas to uphold standards that we believe in (people should not be victimized by their own government, no one should die of hunger or lack of clean water, you shouldn't throw people in jail for disagreeing with you). But as we work to uphold those standards, let us remind ourselves of our own need for redemption. Let us humbly remind ourselves that we all depend upon God's grace, that God withholds grace from no one, and neither should we.