

“Put Down Those Stones”  
John 7:53 - 8:11  
Rev Michael Poulos  
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First Presbyterian Church of Spruce Pine  
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This morning we continue our focus on the Gospel of John, turning to a very important passage that comes right at the beginning of chapter 8. This remarkable story contains one of the most frequently quoted lines from the whole Bible, “***Let anyone without sin cast the first stone....***” If you open your Bible here or at home (or even on your phone) you’ll see that this passage is bracketed off and there’s a footnote explaining how Bible scholars question whether this story really belongs in John’s Gospel or not. Some think it perhaps fits better in another place like Luke’s gospel - who really knows? I will save the details of the scholarly debate for you to explore on your own if you are interested. But regardless of where it’s supposed to be located, there’s little doubt that the story before us is one of Jesus’ most important teachings on the Old Testament law, on sin, and on the power of God’s grace and forgiveness.

If we look back a little to chapter 7, we see that there’s been some controversy and high drama. Some of the religious leaders have been wanting to arrest and kill Jesus for some time - he has not only broken the sabbath law by healing in the temple (5.2-9), but he has called God his Father and is accused of making himself equal to God (5.18). People are starting to believe he is the Messiah, the King of the Jews, and the religious leaders are threatened. And immediately before our passage, a Pharisee named Nicodemus makes a cameo appearance (7.51-52). Nicodemus speaks up for Jesus, reminding the others that the law doesn’t judge people without first giving them a fair hearing. Let us listen now for God’s Word...

Then each of them went home, while Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. Early in the morning he came again to the temple. All the people came to him and he sat down and began to teach them.

The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery; and making her stand before all of them, they said to him, “Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?”

They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him.

Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, “Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground. When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders; and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. Jesus straightened up and said to her,

“Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” She said, “No one, sir.” And Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.”

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

I love top ten lists. Though I don't have time to watch a lot of sports on TV, I do have time most mornings to turn on ESPN right before 8 o'clock and watch the top ten plays of the previous day. I love how in addition to big time sports teams they will include smaller teams like UNC-Asheville and occasionally high school teams, too. I grew up listening to American Top 40 every weekend, and loved to know where my favorite songs ranked from week to week. Making lists of things is a fun if not useful thing to do.

If I asked you to rank the top ten sins, I wonder what you would come up with? I bet some of you would turn to the 10 commandments - don't steal, don't take the Lord's name in vain, don't worship any idols.... This would be a good place to start. Going way back in the history of the Christian faith, there are the so-called [“Seven Deadly Sins”](#) to be avoided: pride, greed, wrath, envy, lust, gluttony and sloth. But if we are to take an honest assessment of the Christian tradition, sins involving sexual misbehavior rank at or near the top of most lists.

A good example of this would be this morning's passage. It is often referred to as “the story of the woman caught in adultery.” The story begins one morning with Jesus teaching a large crowd of people outside the temple in Jerusalem. The Jewish religious leaders, the scribes and the Pharisees, bring a woman to Jesus, placing her in the middle of the scene. They announce, “Teacher, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery. The law of Moses commands us to stone her to death. What do you say about her? (8.4-5).” John the narrator tells us that they are testing Jesus, so that if he says something wrong they might have some charge to bring against him. And from what we heard going on in the last chapter - the attempt to have Jesus arrested by the temple police - we know these leaders are threatened by Jesus and his authority. Their motives are not pure, and so we should see their accusation of the woman as a red flag. Bible scholar Frances Taylor Gench makes the case that something is indeed wrong with the picture the religious leaders paint for Jesus. “For one thing, where is the man who has been caught with the woman ‘in the very act of committing adultery’? (Is the woman only being scapegoated, and the man being excused for his behavior?) “Other irregularities appear as well. The religious authorities speak of only half of the law of Moses - though they claim it is required to punish the woman, in fact the law called for BOTH the man and woman involved (Gench, [Encounters with Jesus: Studies in the Gospel of John](#), p. 52) in adultery to be stoned to death (Leviticus 20.10). And where are the witnesses other than those who are bringing the charges? I think a reasonable jury would find it hard to press charges against this woman who has been accused of adultery.

Though we will never know for sure the details of what happened before this scene, what we do know is that Jesus does not take the bait. Instead of arguing with the religious leaders, he does something quite disarming. He bends down and simply writes something in the dirt. As they continue to question him, he remains silent. Sometimes actions speak louder than words! We will never know what he wrote, and since this is the only place in the Bible where Jesus is said to write anything, Bible scholars have been very curious, speculating for centuries about what he might have written. We will never know what he wrote in the dirt, but when he finally stands up he speaks the truth in love: “Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her.” And to their credit, the men begin to leave one by one, beginning with the most respected elders, dropping their stones in silence but speaking loudly with their actions.

I love how Jesus turns the tables on this woman’s accusers. Instead of focusing on the one who is being used as an object, the one who is being labeled a sinner and worthy of death, Jesus first invites the accusers to consider their own sins. As the old proverb goes, when you point a finger at someone else you have three pointed back at yourself. Yes, it’s easy to be judgemental about the sin we see in others, but what about the log in our own eyes (Matthew 7.5)? When we have the prayer of confession each week in worship, we are reminded that all of us are sinners - we all miss the mark time and time again - failing to fully be the people God intends for us to be. In his letter to the Romans Paul puts it like this: “For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (3.22-23).

Church historian Roberta Bondi highlights the importance of being able to see ourselves as sinners. She writes, learning how to cultivate “the virtue of seeing ourselves as sinners is a major source of healing the wounds of judgmentalism in our hearts... Knowing I am a sinner means taking seriously the knowledge that we all do or at least are capable of [doing] terrible things... [indeed] it is not possible to love other people unless we understand at a very deep level [that our failings at love] put us all in the same boat.” (Roberta C. Bondi, [To Pray and to Love: Conversations on Prayer with the Early Church](#), p. 109, as quoted in Gench, p. 61)

I love how Jesus does not shame the religious leaders - he does not give them a guilt trip or beat them up for misquoting the scriptures about stoning those caught in adultery. No, instead of **calling them out** for their bad behavior, Jesus **calls them in** towards self-knowledge and hopefully repentance. Jesus invites them to reflect on their own hearts - to reflect that none of them are without sin, and that by dropping their stones they are opening the door to the way of freedom and forgiveness.

But the story is not over yet - after all the accusers leave one by one, Jesus stands up again and is alone with the woman. If you have been paying attention to John’s Gospel, you may remember that we have seen something like this before. Back in chapter 4, when Jesus spoke to the Samaritan woman at the well, he came face to face with a woman whose name is also not recorded in the Bible - a woman who had been carrying much shame about her marital status - a woman who was thirsty for living water and a new start in life. Here in John chapter 8 is a much shorter conversation, but one just as powerful.

“Woman, where are they? Has anyone condemned you?” She said, “No one, Lord.” And Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you; go, and do not sin again.”

Instead of requiring her to repent of her past sins, to pray the sinner's prayer or do anything at all, Jesus announces the good news that there is no one left standing to condemn her - not her accusers, not Jesus, not God. With this assurance and the promise of God's grace, she is invited to live into a future free from sin.

You see, this story really is not just about a woman accused of adultery - it's also about the self-righteous people caught in the trap of judgmentalism. It's also about the human struggle we all share with sin. Yes, we are all in the same boat and this is what we are reminded of each week in worship. When we confess our sins before God and before each other, we acknowledge our ongoing need for God's grace. Though we may be tempted to believe we are better than others who commit one of the top ten sins, the gospel is the humbling good news that on our own, there is none that is righteous. Without the saving grace of God none of us could stand a chance.

This Wednesday marks the beginning of the season of Lent, the six weeks of spiritual preparation before the celebration of Easter. At the service on Wednesday afternoon we all have the chance to receive what is called the imposition of ashes. On our foreheads will be placed a sign of the cross, a reminder of our mortality. ***“Remember you are from dust, and to dust you shall return.”*** In the Bible ashes are also a sign of our sinfulness - people would put on sackcloth and ashes as a way of acknowledging publicly their status as sinners. Today's passage reminds us that yes, we are all in the same boat, and Jesus continues to invite us to put down our stones of judgment and self-righteousness. We put them down not to condone or give approval to sin but because we recognize that God alone is the One who is the final Judge. And the God we have come to know in Jesus - the one who is Emmanuel, God with us in the flesh - this God is not only our Maker but also our Redeemer, the one who poured out his life on the cross out of love for the whole world - including you and me.

Thanks be to God. Amen.