Sermon on the Woman Caught in Adultery

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John 7: 53Then each of them went home, John 8:1-11 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.”

One of the benefits of preaching through a book of the bible is that it calls the preacher and the congregation to engage with the wide spectrum of the messages of scriptures. Our passage this morning is one of scripture’s great teachings on sin and forgiveness, on justification and sanctification, on condemnation and freedom all wrapped up around a story relating to human sexuality.

The scriptures and sexuality have become a major issue in our denomination and, consequently a significant issue in the life of this church. It was interesting to me this week as I was praying about and preparing for this sermon that I had one member of this church, a good man who is really struggling
with whether he and his family can stay here or not because of our affiliation with the PCUSA, urge me
to preach more on a biblical view of sexuality based on a high view of the authority of scripture. I had
another group of guys that I meet with tell me – the very next day – that they were tired of all the
conversation about sexuality here and want us to move on because the scriptures, which they too view
as having ultimate authority over our lives as Christians, focused more on matters of justice and
kindness than it did on issues of sexual practices.

Well, whether you want more said, or perhaps more said clearly, about a biblical ethic of human
sexuality; or whether you want less said and more of a focus on other, broader, themes in scripture, this
morning God has given us a passage with important insights into the sexual ethic of Jesus and how he
calls us to treat one another regarding issues of sexuality. Because of what is being said here, because it
intersects with much of what I think are the issues within our denomination, the broader church, and
the culture – and because this is Jesus talking, I want for us to look especially carefully at this passage.

This is a story about the Pharisees and the scribes bringing a woman caught in the act of adultery to
Jesus to see if he will agree with their biblical understanding that she must be killed for her sins. It is a
story of the way in which Jesus reacts to the claims of these religious leaders, the way in which Jesus
uses scripture to assess human relationships, and at the end it is a story of the way Jesus both comforts
and challenges the woman herself.

Before we can examine the conversation between Jesus and the woman, we first must look at the
correspondence conversation between Jesus and the scribes and Pharisees who bring the disgraced woman to him. The
initial observation that we must make about the scribes and the Pharisees is that if you believe in the
authority of scripture as a once and for all principle, then you must give some credence to these bible
scholars. Theirs is the most literal view of the scriptures. The Old Testament law, the “law that Moses
commanded” tells the scribes and Pharisees that woman should be stoned. If we have a high view of
the authority of scripture, if we believe that it is the inspired Word of God, then our initial reaction here is to have to consider carefully the position of the Pharisees and scribes here.

That doesn’t feel right to you, does it? At least I hope that doesn’t feel right. Why would we, especially those of us who place great importance on the role of scripture in our own lives and in the church, why would we not go along with the scribes and Pharisees here?

If you know those scriptures related to adultery and its punishment, the first part of our objection to what the religious leaders are doing here is based on their unequal application of the law. The two scriptures that outlaw adultery and call for death as its punishment both say that both the male and female adulterers are to be killed. But here we see the way in which our sinful human nature always tempts us to condemn the ones who are not like us and protect the ones who do.

Because of our human sinful nature, the one who does not look like us is the “other” and we do not trust the “other.” To spell it out: all these scribes and Pharisees are men; we see the hypocrisy that they would condemn a woman and not a man for the same crime.

As I will throughout this morning’s study of this scripture, I want to ask you to have the courage, and to receive the fullness of Christ’s grace, to look within yourself for where this story mirrors your own life, your own tendencies, and your own need for mercy. I know for me when it comes to judgment about sin, my tendency is to see the “other,” the one who does not look like me as more prone to be a sinner. This has been in my life one of the real lessons as I have been asked to weigh in on the sinfulness of homosexual practice. It has been easy for me to see it as sin because it is not my sin or my temptation. Does that make those scriptures that condemn homosexual practice a little easier for me to affirm than scriptures that condemn greed or impatience or anger or heterosexual lust? We may be more like the Pharisees here than we would like to admit.
When we say that the scriptures have authority, we are declaring that this bible is an instrument of God’s message for our lives. **It’s more of a love letter than a law book,** certainly, but it does give to us God’s loving instructions as how to live our lives. Scriptures do provide a moral and ethical framework for life which includes lists of things to do and things not to do. Why? What is the purpose of scripture speaking out against sin? It is understood that the bible’s prohibitions against sin are meant to redirect us to the righteousness of God. But here, the proposed death of the woman, by the scribes and Pharisees, is not really about her sin but, John says it is about their desire to test and trap Jesus. **The authority of scripture and the life of a human being created in the image of God are being used as a tool to condemn the behavior of the “other.” Even more, scripture is being used by the religiously powerful to conserve their authority against the threat to their power that is Jesus.**

What is motivating the scribes and the Pharisees? Is it really a love of scripture or the righteous law of God, or the preservation of marriage? No, it is to trap Jesus because he threatens them. What is he threatening? He is threatening their power, their authority, and their position in the culture. This is not about the desire of the Pharisees to uphold the righteousness of God but about their fear of being swept out of power and positions of influence. They don’t want to change or grow or be made uncomfortable; all things that are guaranteed to happen to anyone who has a true encounter with Jesus.

In our hearts many of us fear the same thing. Many of us grew up in a setting where to be a Christian and to belong to a church carried social approval and even a measure of cultural power. We no longer live an overall culture that rewards the “Christian” life. For many of our neighbors it doesn’t matter that
we belong to a church and that we identify as a Christian. Our moral standards don’t reflect the standards of a culture that does not have very many, if any, remaining universal moral standards.

That is threatening to us not only because we see the destructive power of breaking the rules but also because those are our rules and they are not being followed. And when the ambiguous standards of the broader culture move into our churches it doesn’t just threaten our theological understandings but it threatens our positions of influence and power within and without the church.

If we liked the status quo (and here in this story, the scribes and Pharisees loved the status quo) then we react with strong emotions to anything that threatens our position of influence. We like security, just like the scribes did, but Jesus never promises us the security of position but only the new life that comes when we die to the old life and its siren call to seek the status of the world. If we see and use the scriptures as a means of holding on to power and position, we read them wrongly.

So how do we read the scriptures? How do we uphold its authority without turning that authority into a weapon to use on others? The beginning of John’s gospel gives us the key. John calls Jesus, “The Word.” The Word interprets the Word. The reformed church has always said that we believe that scripture informs scripture which means that for us really for us, the Word that is Christ informs the Word that is scripture.

Here in this bible passage, Jesus will not use scripture as a weapon against this woman or in support of the ongoing power of the Pharisees. One of the ways in which Jesus deals with others is that he never wounds the wounded. He will speak truth to power but he never disparages the powerless. Jesus doesn’t see the scriptures as tool to hold power or to fend off the “other,” the person who is not like you.
Jesus, who says of himself that he is “The Way, the Truth, and the Life,” will not let the truth of scripture trump the importance of the individual human being. It’s not that the truth doesn’t matter to Jesus – he will acknowledge the woman’s sin and tell her not to repeat it – but Jesus deals with people individually, never as an example of some broader point or an “object lesson.” In the sexuality battles of our denomination both sides have sought to politicize people rather than to see them as individuals created by God, and men and women for whom Jesus died. We have primarily dealt with the issue of homosexuality legislatively (votes on the floor of presbyteries and the GA) rather than pastorally (churches, lay leaders, and pastors faithfully and steadfastly meeting with individuals in the church and community who are dealing with sexual issues). Isn’t it time for us to follow Jesus and to begin to see each person as an individual – all of us mired in our sin yet each of us created in the beautiful image of God?

Isn’t it time for all of us who ascribe to the unique authority of scripture to read it with the wisdom and discernment with which Jesus reads it and to call upon Christ to open it up to us?

The scribes and Pharisees set the trap for Jesus but if you have been reading the gospels at all you know that Jesus doesn’t fall into traps. John says that Jesus bent down to write on the ground with his finger. No one knows what he wrote but Dale Bruner speculates that he was drawing attention away from the terrified woman by placing it upon himself. I wonder if he was buying time. I wonder with the passion and emotions riding so high and with the stakes being a human life, if Jesus didn’t write in the sand to slow things down, to give everyone there a chance to cool off.

One of the things that we have done here at First Pres is to be very deliberate about our response to the denomination. After several months of conversation and deliberation in the aftermath of the passage of 10-A our Session took a stance of continuing to require that all of our ordained leaders maintain a life of chastity outside of marriage or a life of fidelity within marriage and that we continued to define
marriage as the union of one man and one woman. Since then we have established a working group that will lead us in some conversation about Christian sexual ethics and our broader relationship with the denomination. There are five members of the working group and even that selection process took time. You will learn more about the working group in the January newsletter but I can tell you this now: We will continue to be deliberate, thoughtful, and prayerful, about all of this.

Even though Jesus paused to write on the ground, the religious leaders kept on questioning him. They pushed him to condemn the woman. Jesus then responded with words that are still quoted today: “Let the one who is without sin cast the first stone.” The words, but even more the authority of Jesus stopped the religious leaders in their tracks. Here’s the truth – and it is a truth I think they know – they are standing in the presence of the only one who is capable of throwing that first stone, the only one there who is without sin, and he will not succumb to the violence of condemnation. They are faced then, by the presence of Jesus, with their hypocrisy and with their cruelty. Jesus returns to the ground and writes more, this time giving the men time to walk away and, by again drawing attention to himself, allowing them to leave in dignity. Jesus offers respect to both the woman and the religious leaders; more importantly he offers forgiveness and new life to both parties.

Where is Jesus questioning you and your motivations? Where is Jesus asking you to examine your heart for hypocrisy in your actions? He loves us too much to let us rest in our sinful search for security.

They leave, these chastened scribes and Pharisees. John tells us that the eldest leave first and I cannot help but wonder if that is because the experience of age sands off our hard edges and gives us the perspective to see more broadly and hence more compassionately. I have witnessed that relaxation of dogmatism in the attitudes of many of the elders in this church and I am grateful for it.

Old or young, eventually they all leave. The woman is left with Jesus. What is true for her is true for you and me as well. The day and time will come; it may already have come for most of you, when you will
be left alone with Jesus. As we stand alone in the presence of the one who is true light, you and I will become acutely aware of our own darkness. We will recognize the sinlessness of Jesus and the way in which it stands in contrast to our own sin. We will realize that we are in the presence of the Judge and that he has the right to judge us and to even condemn us. “Who condemns you?” Jesus asks the woman. “No one,” she says, perhaps anxious as to what Jesus will do to judge her. “Neither do I,” says Jesus. The only one who has the authority to condemn will not use that authority for that purpose. He will instead use his authority to forgive. No matter how caught you feel by your sin, Jesus will forgive you and set you free. He did that for the woman then and he will do that for you today.

The story doesn’t end there though, does it? The gift that Jesus gives in forgiving the woman is not his final gift. He will not only free her from condemnation but he will free her to a life lived outside of sin.

Let’s be very clear about this: Jesus doesn’t condemn the woman but he still calls her sin, “sin.” For our purposes this morning let’s define sin as “the actions and thoughts that keep us from receiving the fullness of the blessings of God.” If living the best and fullest life we can is our goal, then we recognize that sin will keep us from the best and fullest relationship with God and hence from that life. To name sin, as Jesus does here, is a gift not a curse. You cannot begin the treatment program if the doctor does not first name the disease. “Go and sin no more” is not penance or punishment. It is a release. This is what Jesus does here for the woman: he releases her from her deadly disease, from her sin. The sin here is the sin of sex outside of marriage.

When you read the scriptures the only explicit blessing that God gives for sexual union comes under the marriage relationship between a man and a woman. Furthermore in the ethical teachings of Jesus on the subject of sex, whether on lust or divorce, he always using those teachings to uphold marriage and again, he only speaks of marriage as between one man and one woman. The seminal scripture that
Jesus quotes and seems to base his entire marriage/sexual ethic on is Genesis 2:24 – “Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.”

Now good people who love Jesus and believe in scripture can see a sexual ethic beyond this and particularly one that would allow for a committed monogamous same sex couple. But it is not condemning for followers of Jesus to insist that there is a Christian sexual ethic and to live into it is to live into the fuller blessings of the Kingdom of Jesus. The sexual ethic of our culture, or lack of a sexual ethic, fills me with sadness. It is not condemning to say to the world, there is a better way. Don't condemn yourself to death – a soulless living death – by surrendering to the base urges that the powers of darkness call good.

To call a person into a lifetime of sexual chastity or fidelity within marriage is what Jesus is doing here with this woman. This is hard for so many of us; some of us because of the power of attractions outside of a marriage relationship, some of us because circumstances keep us living alone, even if we don’t want or seek that.

If we as his followers are going to ask our brothers and sisters to enter into this life of sacrificial love then we must be the Body of Christ to them. All those who live in a state of chastity, whether they are opposite or same sex attracted, are not called to live in isolation. Before instituting marriage in the Genesis passage, God says, “It is not good for a human being to be alone.” That is true for all; which means we all need each other and to be in deep and spiritual, emotional intimacy with each other. We cannot ask of anyone to live a sacrificial life unless we are willing to sacrifice ourselves alongside. The
single people of this congregation must be recognized as fully members of the Body and integrated completely into our community.

“Go and sin no more.” These words of Jesus are for each of us; they are words that free us from the soul-destroying powers of the judgment of the Pharisees and the equally soul-destroying actions of the adulterous woman. Jesus does not condemn us. He frees us from condemnation. He frees us just as much from our sin. The one without sin, who alone could condemn, alone bore our sin and condemnation on the cross. His death frees us and his resurrection gives us a life that can be lived without the death and trap of sin. I hope you know that this morning. I hope you experience the fullness of the freedom of Christ and will live to share that grace and freedom with others.