Neither Do I Condemn You

John 7:53-8:11

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Introduction

This morning we take up one of the most beloved of all texts in the Gospel of John.

It is therefore inconvenient that this passage does not appear in the earliest NT manuscripts. In most modern English Bibles it is offered with brackets around it, reflecting that fact. In some manuscripts it is found elsewhere in John, and it has been known to show up in Luke. Oh well.

The reason we still find it in our Bibles, even in brackets, is because of its extraordinary power. It is an incredible story. But more: it reflects something important about the character of Jesus. And about the human condition. And about religion. And about the intersection of sin and grace. And maybe not a little bit about sex, men, women, and power. So we keep telling the story, and we keep learning from it, and being formed by it. Let us today listen for the Word of God in it.

Setting

***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. -Jn 7:53-8:2***

The story starts with what sounds like a narrative from the last week of Jesus’ life. He has made his way from Galilee to the Temple in Jerusalem, acclaimed by the crowds who hang on his every word. He is met by hostility from the Temple authorities and other religious leaders, but they can do nothing against him, his popularity is so great. He teaches all day in the Temple, goes ‘home’ to the Mount of Olives in the evening, and comes back again the next morning. Picture a scene in which Jesus is in the center of a large circle of people listening to him in the Temple.

The Incident

***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?” –Jn 8:3-5***

The scribes are not otherwise mentioned in the Gospel of John. They were legal scholars, skilled in the textual tradition. The Pharisees, precursors of the rabbis, were known at the time for their strict interpretation of Torah and for the development of a creative oral, and eventually written tradition, around Torah. What these two groups had in common was the understanding of God’s will as being inscribed in sacred text; that text interpreted primarily in terms of Law; that Law being understood as religious, moral, and civil, all together and intertwined; and themselves being the leading adjudicators of this religious-legal-moral interpretation and implementation, though somewhat frustrated by the misfortune of Jewish sovereignty being hindered by Roman rule.

So at one level this is a court case. The lawyers bring a legal case – a capital case, actually -- to Jesus and ask him to rule.

Jewish law required two or three eyewitnesses for execution (Deut 17:6). The text leaves little doubt that sufficient eyewitnesses claim to have seen the very act. This is not a matter of a husband’s jealous suspicion but of eyewitness testimony to adultery in process.

Old Testament law was also very strict about false testimony (Ex. 20:16, 23:1). Those who swore falsely to someone else’s hurt could be punished with the very punishment they were seeking to have happen to someone else.

The legal basis here is clear. Leviticus 20:10 and Deuteronomy 22:22 both prescribe execution (though not necessarily by stoning) for adultery. The accusers conveniently appear to forget that both the man and the woman are to be executed in cases of adultery. Though here it is important to note a gender injustice in OT law – a married man could only be found guilty of adultery if he was with another man’s wife; a married woman if she was with anyone. This was rooted not just in patriarchal power but specifically in the idea that a woman belongs to her father and then to her husband.

By the first century, it appears that Jewish executions for adultery were very rare; this was especially the case under Rome, which in theory reserved the capital power for itself.

But maybe then this wasn’t really about law. After all, there is no trial here. Maybe this is more like the scene in ‘Mockingbird’ where the townsmen surround the jail and only Atticus Finch stands between the mob and a lynching of the falsely accused Tom.

A lone woman, partly clad perhaps, is surrounded by a howling group of men who perhaps both want her and want her dead.

And the only thing standing between her and this mob is Jesus.

The Test

***They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him. -Jn 8:6***

It is a test for Jesus, one of several times in the Gospels when Jesus’ adversaries think they have put him in a no-win situation.

If he refuses to support enforcing Torah, he can be made to look like a rebel against God.

If he supports enforcing Torah, his reputation for mercy is destroyed and perhaps he attracts the negative attention of Rome.

Meanwhile a woman’s life hangs in the balance.

Who Goes First?

***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. -Jn 8:6-8***

There are many theories as to why Jesus is doodling on the ground, and what he is writing (or even drawing). Perhaps he is writing out his verdict, as Roman judges did before reading them. Perhaps he is slowing down the mob by breaking into their rage with his deliberative silence. Perhaps he is supernaturally writing down the sins he knows in the hearts of the people around him. Or just perhaps he is protecting the woman’s modesty by refusing to look at her when everyone around him was more than looking.

His words strike with brutal, unmistakable power, in a formulation so unforgettable that it inscribed itself in the memory of Bible readers everywhere. ***Let him who is without sin cast the first stone***. I think the male pronoun is better here. I don’t think there are women in this crowd.

This move was entirely novel. There had been no idea of anything like this in Old Testament law. It is entirely subversive of any legal system. Sin/crime must be punished. The community, through its judges mainly but not only, must do the punishing. Judging crime has nothing to do with the virtue of the community, the judges, or the individuals involved. No one does a moral inventory today on a judge over at the courthouse when it is time to pronounce sentence.

But in this situation, that is precisely what Jesus requires of all those men with rocks in their hands. (Perhaps picked up from building materials in the uncompleted temple, an irony in itself.) Take an inventory, gentlemen. Ask yourself whether you are innocent. If you are, go ahead and be the first to draw blood.

Maybe it had something to do with the particular circumstances. Perhaps the whole deal was a setup against the woman – perhaps a husband who wanted his wife dead so he could get her property – perhaps false witnesses. It has been suggested, but it doesn’t seem likely.

Maybe it’s about the lynch mob mentality. Boys, are you innocent here today? Is this virtue you are exercising? Is God pleased with what is happening here?

Maybe it’s about lust + blood lust, a group of men wanting to punish a woman for getting out of line, for escaping their sexual control. Maybe Jesus is asking them just in time to check the state of their hearts before they hurl those stones.

The Result

***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. -Jn 8:9***

The oldest have the longest memories. Perhaps they have the greatest honesty about themselves. And in Jewish culture they would have understood that they had the greatest communal responsibility. So, as if in a procession, they left the stoning circle and went home. Imperfect men ready to enact justice by stoning were trumped by the only perfect one, ready to enact forgiveness by grace.

***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.” -Jn 8:10-11***

Only now, when the mob is gone, does Jesus straighten up and look directly in the eyes of the woman whose life he has spared. His tenderness is palpable. We picture her trembling with those near-miss trembles that some of us know, when death has come close but we are still alive. Trembling perhaps with the astonishment that on this day mercy prevailed. Trembling with barely believing gratitude.

In John 3 Jesus says that he did not come to condemn the world but to save it. Here Jesus enacts that commitment in real time and living color.

Notice that he does not demand some statement of repentance from the woman. He does send her home with the direction to not repeat adultery. That’s it. No mandated divorce; no mandated death; no mandated condemnation. Mercy, with direction for living, in perfect harmony, offered by the only human – God enfleshed – who has ever gotten that balance exactly right. The only one.

On Truth, Holiness, and Grace

I used to be a co-pastor at a church in a faraway land called Tennessee. In that church, members renewed annually and did so by signing a covenant to live Christianly and meet certain commitments to the congregation. In a complete reversal of our situation here, in the heyday of that church there were about twice as many attenders as members.

So membership was taken seriously. But someone had to enforce the terms of the covenant. This was entrusted to the pastors. The all-male pastors.

One time one of the leading laywomen in the church, a mother of two teenagers, became involved in an affair. Her husband was aggrieved, her children outraged. Because she had violated the terms of her covenant (covenants), she was removed from membership. Eventually she divorced, and later married the man she had been involved with. Her ex-husband and children stayed in the church.

Easy, right? Only later did we find out the messy background. Her marriage had been a story of neglect and frustration. Her efforts to get her husband’s attention and ask for better had gone unheeded, month after month and year after year. His sins against their marriage over twenty years were less flamboyant than hers over six months. But hers was easily named and condemned. His less so. He was innocent. Right? No.

Should he also then have been confronted, disciplined, excluded from the church? Should neither have been?

Human behavior is so complex. Human beings make such imperfect judges. Even so, Baptist churches along with most others for centuries attempted to enforce Christian behavioral standards as that church back in Tennessee did. Often they made a hash of it, but they did what they did because they believed that the commitment to following Jesus has behavioral implications that Christians must take seriously.

So now we are in the 21st century. No one at FBC Decatur (or most churches) is writing or enforcing behavioral covenants. This means we err on the side of grace rather than law. Often we congratulate ourselves on so doing. But let us acknowledge that it is indeed also possible to ERR on the side of grace, just as we so often err on the side of law.

Now we have few means of rebuking, correcting, and encouraging one another to take the higher road in life. Now if we have a member who is wrecking their marriage, or children, or the peace and good order of the church, we have little idea what to do. We mainly just look on helplessly.

So: Legalism has its grave costs. But so does the collapse of behavioral standards. Only Jesus gets it exactly right.

And only Jesus – blessed, wonderful Jesus – knows fully, completely, and without bias what is going on in that heart, that marriage, that family, that church. Only Jesus. We muddle through, doing the best we can. Jesus puts it all together – truth, holiness, and grace. They come together most decisively at the Cross.

Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more.