

The Woman Caught in Adultery

The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James

Sermon Series:
Following Jesus
Around

John 8:1-11

...this story is authentic, because I doubt that people would have come up with this story all by themselves.

During the month of January, we have been following Jesus around in the gospel of John. Two Sundays ago, our focus was Jesus' words about being born again. The woman in our story has been totally reborn. Last Sunday, Jesus spoke about living water as a metaphor for new life. The woman in our story has been given a whole new lease on life.

You may have noticed that our Scripture lesson in John 8 is bracketed in the pew Bible. The original Revised Standard Version prints this passage in italics at the bottom of the page. In the New English Bible, this story appears at the end of John's gospel. Most of the earliest manuscripts do not include this story. Most likely, it was not an original part of John's gospel. Most scholars believe it to be an authentic story of Jesus, although there is not universal agreement about its authenticity.

I believe this story is authentic, because I doubt that people would have come up with this story all by themselves. I'm not at all sure that people are capable of such profundity. Jesus walks a perfect line between justice and mercy. More about that a few moments from now.

Becca presented this story to us in dramatic form, but let's walk

back through the story verse by verse. The story opens with Jesus teaching in the temple courts (8:2). Jesus sits down to teach; a customary posture for teaching in those days. I didn't realize until this week that the practice of establishing a chair at a university correlates to the ancient rabbinic practice of sitting while teaching.

While Jesus is teaching, religious leaders (Scribes and Pharisees) bring in a woman who has been caught in the act of adultery (8:3). Let me see if I understand this correctly. The woman has just been caught in the very act of sexual relations with a man. Oh my! Two witnesses were required by Biblical law whenever a charge was brought before a judge (Deuteronomy 19:15). I suspect, given the private nature of sex, that such charges are not brought before a judge very often.

There is something fishy in this story right from the start. I mean, where's the man? It takes two to commit adultery. Biblical law specified that men and women were equally liable for such behavior (Leviticus 20:10; 22:22). But the man is nowhere to be found. We are supplied with a clue to what else is going on in verse 6. They were trying to trap Jesus.

So this whole adultery caper is a setup. The unidentified man lures the woman into an adulterous liai-

***Jesus is
trapped.
It's a perfect
setup.***

son in order that the conniving religious leaders can ambush Jesus. They are not seeking Jesus' guidance on the subject, they are trying Jesus.

"Teacher," they say in verse 4, "This woman was caught in the act of adultery. In the law, Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now, what do you say?"

They are right about one thing: adultery is a crime punishable by death. Don't you find that stunning! The fact that adultery carries with it such a harsh penalty is a subject for another day, but suffice it to say that it expresses something remarkable about the high regard God's Word has for the covenant of marriage!

How ironic that while the punishment falls on men and women equally, only the woman stands before Jesus. I suspect the religious authorities have made allowances for the man to escape.

Jesus is trapped. If he directs them to stone her, Jesus will be guilty of violating Roman law, since Jews were forbidden to enact the death penalty (18:31). If he lets the woman go, he will be liable for disregarding Jewish law. It's a perfect setup.

Jesus, in verse 6, bends down to write something in the ground with his finger (8:6). Wouldn't you love to know what Jesus is writing in the sand? John doesn't tell us what Jesus is writing. Some commentators think he is writing his verdict in the sand, since it was required of Roman judges to write the verdict before reading it aloud.

Maybe the delay is intended to heighten the suspense. John tells us they kept questioning him (8:7). I can picture Jesus in a kneeling posture, writing in the sand while the religious authorities hover over him, pressing for an answer.

Jesus straightens up and says to them, "Let the one without sin cast the first stone" (8:7). With that, he resumes writing.

What a brilliant rebuttal. The word "brilliant" is overused in our culture. Sportscasters are the worst. They are forever saying that was a brilliant play or a brilliant catch; spectacular, perhaps, but not brilliant. What Jesus says to his accusers, now that's brilliant!

These religious leaders are rendered speechless by Jesus' words. Biblical law specified that the victims of the crime would initiate the stoning. Since there are no victims present to carry out the judgment, the task falls to the oldest. They don't want this woman's blood on their hands, so, one by one, beginning with the eldest, they leave (8:9). Their exit, one at a time, suggests something on the order of a procession.

Jesus is left alone with the woman still standing there (8:9). This whole drama has been played out while this woman has been standing there. She is merely a pawn in their chess game. These religious authorities are willing to orchestrate the conditions of her arrest in order to trap Jesus. Slime balls!

"Woman, where are your accusers? Has no one condemned you?" (8:9).

Jesus will not wink at sin, but neither will he condemn us to hell for it.

“No one, Sir.” (8:10).

“Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more.” (8:11). Fortunately for her (and for us), Jesus is more interested in her future than her past.

Where do you see yourself in this story? Perhaps you see yourself in the censorious judgment of the Pharisees. Maybe, like this woman, you feel God’s wrath and need to hear Jesus’ gracious pardon, “Neither do I condemn you.” Or maybe, like this woman, your life has become unmanageable, and you need to heed Jesus’ admonition, “Go and sin no more.”

Jesus walks the perfect line in this story between justice and mercy. “Go and sin no more” is the epitome of justice. “Neither do I condemn you” is the essence of mercy. We read earlier in John, “For God did not send his son into the world to condemn the world, but so that the world could be saved through him” (3:17).

The Bible asserts that God is love (1 John 4:17). Love is one of God’s essential attributes. Some people in our day thereby conclude that God’s only attribute is love. The Bible also declares that God is just (2 Thessalonians 1:6). We can’t press either attribute too far in one direction. An overemphasis on justice obscures love; an overemphasis on love obscures God’s justice.

If God is only love, there would be no justice in the world. If God is only just, none of us would

receive the pardon we desperately need. If truth be told, we want justice for everyone else, but mercy for us.

There are Christians today who make a distinction between the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament. There is nothing novel about such a distinction. The early church leader Marcion proposed that the Old Testament God was a God of wrath and justice while the New Testament God was a God of mercy and grace. Surely, Marcion concluded, we must be dealing with two different gods.

We believe it is possible for God to be, at one and the same time, both just and merciful.

Let’s imagine we are standing on top of a mountain. To one side of the mountain is mercy, to the other side is justice. We can fall off the mountain in either direction. We can fall off the mountain on the side of justice. Excessive justice becomes harsh and punitive. We can also fall off the mountain on the side of mercy. Excessive mercy becomes permissive and lenient. Somehow, we must find a way to stay on top of the mountain.

Those of you who are parents know what it is like to walk the tightrope between justice and mercy. We must preserve for our children a sense of fairness in family relationships. Justice requires there to be punishment for irresponsible behavior. But we must also be able to show mercy to our children. Excessive discipline will break the spirit of a child.

***We deserve
God's justice.
But God in
Jesus Christ
offers us one
better. It's
called mercy.***

Fortunately for us, Jesus finds a way to do both! Jesus will not wink at sin, but neither will he condemn us to hell for it.

God is just. God declares with definitive judgment what is sinful. Whenever children are abused and spouses cheated on, whenever there is corporate greed and wanton disregard of God's good creation, God holds people accountable. Disregarding sin carries with it the threat of eternal separation from God; what the Bible calls hell. Preachers don't talk about hell any longer. The word has all but been expunged from our religious vocabulary. But hell is a consequence for people who persistently separate themselves from God.

God is not only just, God is merciful. Mercy is receiving what we don't deserve. God doesn't give us what our sins deserve. God gives us something more. In the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, God offers us mercy.

A mother once approached Napoleon seeking a pardon for her son. The emperor replied that the young man had committed a certain offense twice and justice demanded death.

"But I'm not asking for justice," the mother insisted. "I plead for mercy."

"But your son does not deserve mercy," Napoleon replied.

"Sir," the woman exclaimed, "It would not be mercy if he deserved it and mercy is all I ask for."

"Well then," said the emperor, "I will grant mercy." Napoleon spared the woman's son.

We deserve God's justice. But God in Jesus Christ offers us one better. It's called mercy.

