



BIRMINGHAM FIRST
A UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

First Things First:
“THE FIRST TO THROW A STONE?”

Rev. Gary Haller
First United Methodist Church
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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, Lord.” And Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.” (John 8:2-11)

Near the end of his life, Norman Vincent Peale wrote about the influence of his father, who was a Methodist preacher in Ohio. The elder Rev. Peale studied long, worked hard, and loved people. Norman said, “One day when I was just a little kid, I saw my father sitting on a curb in Columbus, Ohio, *sobbing*. I asked him, ‘Dad, what is wrong?’ My dad said, ‘I’ve been out visiting people and the sorrows and troubles break my heart and I just needed to talk to the Lord about it.’” Norman Vincent Peale said, “That day I knew I wanted to care for people like my father cared for people.”

Peale went on to say, “When I was preparing my first sermon, I went to my daddy and I asked him, ‘What should I say? The needs are so great—what should I say to them?’ My father said, ‘Norman, don’t try to show off. Don’t try to make people think that you know something. Just show them that God loves them and that will be enough.’”

Wise words, indeed. Unfortunately, the world and the church are full of people who have lost sight of sharing God's love with those who are broken and needy. This passage at the beginning of John, chapter 8, is itself a case in point! Let me show you what I mean.

If your Bible is anything like the Bible I read, you'll be surprised to find this story encompassed by double brackets. Of the many enigmas of John's Gospel, few are more mysterious than the brackets that set this story apart from the rest of John! It's rather obvious that this passage does not belong where we find it! It interrupts the flow of John's tightly stitched narrative. It doesn't even follow the pattern of John's stories. And though, like many passages in John, it gives a starring role to a woman, its polished Greek has all the characteristics of Luke's exceptional command of that language.

This entire passage could easily be slipped into Luke's Gospel at chapter 21, verse 38, where it would make a perfect fit. And it was, in fact, excised from Luke, after which it floated around the early Christian churches, told over and over again, too true to be forgotten, until some scribe squeezed it into a manuscript of John, where he thought it fit. That explains those brackets you find in your Bibles noting that this passage is not found in the earliest versions of John.

But why, for the love of God, was it torn out of Luke in the first place? Because, unlike Jesus, the early Church did *not* forgive adultery and did not wish to show that it was unwilling to forgive like our *Lord* forgave. The early Church quickly had become far more interested in rigid discipline than Jesus had ever shown himself to be. So ripping this passage out of Luke is our first recorded instance of ecclesiastical censorship. John's gospel was written much later, and it was separate from the larger Church much longer, so it's not surprising that they embraced it.

The placement of this episode, however, does not diminish its power. Rather it serves to show how hardened authoritarian hearts work, whether in the legalistic Pharisees of ancient Judaism or in the brokers of power of the early church. Let's begin by looking at the Pharisees who, to no one's surprise, take on the role of the bad guys here. They bring this upon themselves rather quickly for two reasons. First, they want to stone this woman. But second, it soon becomes clear that their real motive is to make Jesus look bad.

How strange this entire scene is! Jesus wasn't passing through some neighborhood when this sin was discovered. No! Jesus was in the temple, and that means that they dragged this poor woman a long way in order to confront Jesus. I can't begin to imagine how she felt. Dragged through the streets, put to shame in the eyes of everyone who saw her. And taken to the temple, of all places, to be thrown before this remarkable teacher, like a lamb thrown to the lions. She's petrified.

This encounter is a set-up par excellence. The Pharisees knew the law. They knew what Moses said to do. It was a cut-and-dry case, right? If they were going to stone her, they should have done it then and there. That's it. Instead, what they did was a carefully designed trap! If Jesus said not to stone her, they could accuse him of false teaching and contradicting the law of Moses! But if he said "Stone her!" they could accuse him of sedition before the Romans, because since 30 A.D. the Romans had taken away the Jews' right of capital punishment. What are we to make of this? The Pharisees aren't really concerned with keeping the Law—the Romans won't let them stone the woman. What they really desire is something by which to condemn Jesus.

Earlier, when they had asked Jesus for his understanding of the law, he said, “The greatest commandment is this: Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments stand all the law and the prophets.” By that standard, it’s clear that these Pharisees were *not* about *loving God* or loving their neighbor as themselves. Rather, they loved a regulation that had nothing to do with loving God. And they weren’t above manipulating the law to bring judgment upon Jesus.

Are you surprised, then, by how Jesus responded? You remember. He’s already sitting, as was the privilege of teachers in the temple in that time. And he doesn’t dignify the Pharisees’ challenge with a direct response. He bends down and writes in the sand with his finger. He doesn’t argue the text with them. He doesn’t ask the obvious question: “How can you catch a woman in the act without managing to catch the man, too?!” The Leviticus text, by the way, demands first that the man be put to death! Nor does Jesus confront them in anger as he does when he tosses the money-changers out of the temple. They keep pestering him in order to get a response, and he’s writing in the sand. What’s he writing? We’d give a great deal to know, but no explanation is given. So I’ll tell you my reading of his response. I think Jesus is absolutely broken-hearted. I wouldn’t be surprised if he’s hanging his head and weeping like Rev. Peale’s father in seeing the needs of the people. My suspicion is that Jesus was writing something like what he said on the cross: “Father, forgive them. They don’t have a *clue* what they are doing.”

Finally, they pester him to the point that he speaks: “Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” His response is brilliant. He reminds them that they are sinners, too! To their credit, the Pharisees know this. They know they have no righteousness to stand on! Jesus is telling them that in the eyes of God, they are all the same. And the only reason they are standing there is because of the forgiveness and grace of God that they did not deserve.

The message is clear: if we are forgiven by God, we are in no position to condemn others. We are only qualified to share that forgiveness. “Who is in a position to condemn?” our confession ritual often asks. “Only Christ Jesus,” we are told—and he does not condemn us. So who are the Pharisees to throw any stones? Who are we to throw any stones? It’s not our place. And see this. The Pharisees walk away, one by one! As it should be, it was the elders who realized their shame and were the first to walk away, leading the others.

So Jesus is left alone with this shamed woman, this powerless pawn of the Pharisees. Again Jesus is bent over, doodling in the sand. He’s still sitting and she’s standing before him. Suddenly he straightens up and, in typical rabbinical style, he asks *her* questions! “Woman, where *are* they? Has no one condemned you?” It’s almost with a sense of amazement that she responds, “No one, Lord!” And Jesus says, “Neither do I condemn you. You are free to go your way. But from now on, do not sin.”

Now, it’s something when pompous, self-righteous blowhards come to see themselves for who they are and, in shame, walk away. Those Pharisees had no right to condemn that woman to a horrible, painful death. But it’s an amazing thing of a different order when the only truly-righteous person in the entire world, the one with the authority and right to condemn her, does *not* condemn her, but with tenderness in his voice says, “Neither do I condemn you.” Jesus is the only person with the right to condemn her, and he’s letting her—and us—know it.

In speaking this word of clemency and grace to her, Jesus is pronouncing forgiveness not only for *her*, but for all of *us*, have we ears to hear. Not only this woman, but all of us, have been caught “dead-to-rights.” And Christ does not condemn us.

In the powerful musical, *Les Miserables*, Jean Valjean is paroled after 19 years of imprisonment for stealing a loaf of bread to feed his sister’s children. Those years in prison had made him a hardened criminal and, like ex-offenders today, he finds it extremely difficult to transfer back into the community. Nobody wants him around and the police are hounding him. Finally, Bishop Myriel of Digne takes him in, treats him with gracious hospitality, provides a beautiful dinner, takes him to his finest guest room, turns back the bed cloth and says, “My place is your place.” Jean cannot believe the bishop’s kindness, so in the middle of the night, he makes off with the silverware!

Before breakfast the next morning, there is a knock at the door. The righteous, judgmental police officer Javert has arrested Jean. He presents Jean to the bishop with all the loot. With a simple word from the bishop, Jean will go back in jail for the rest of his life. Yet the bishop, in a great act of mercy, grabs two nearby candlesticks and says, “Jean, you forgot I gave you these, too! Take them and go!”

As the authorities leave, the condemned and the savior stand face-to-face. The bishop says to Jean Valjean, “My brother, you no longer belong to what is evil. You belong to what is good. I have bought your soul to save it from the black thoughts and the spirit of perdition. And now I give you to God.” And, from that moment, Valjean is a changed man. Although a condemned criminal, he is now repentant, and honorable, kind to all he meets, a benefactor to those in need.

Who will you and I become? Will we be the judgmental Javert, or the forgiven Jean Valjean? Will we be the legally-righteous Pharisees, or the woman who is forgiven? As we come to Christ’s Table today, may we come in gratitude for the forgiveness we have received! “Neither do I condemn you,” said Jesus. “I give you to God. Go your way!”