

John 7:53-8:11
Lent Midweek 2
"The Cross Is..."

March 11, 2020—Shepherd of the Mountains, Pinetop, AZ

INI

A woman has been caught in the act of adultery. The scribes and Pharisees bring her to Jesus in order to test Him. Would He honor the Law of God which required her death for her sin, death by stoning? Or would He challenge them again? What would Jesus do?

There are a few challenging things in this Gospel reading tonight. It's a familiar story. You've heard it several times. But have you stopped to think about some of the details before?

The first challenge for us when we try to make sense of it is that your own Bibles may have a footnote for or brackets surrounding these verses to indicate that these verses do not appear in the earliest manuscripts of the Gospel of John. So, many commentaries refuse to even deal with it other than with a quick comment about how it isn't in those early manuscripts. It appears that these verses were inserted into John's Gospel at a later date; however, there is good evidence in support of the fact that this was a real event in Jesus' ministry. The early church fathers referenced it and preached about it.

Once we get past that challenge, once we accept that this is the Word of God and an actual event in Jesus' life, there are still other challenges. This woman was caught in the act of adultery. The law of Moses requires death by stoning in Leviticus 20 and Deuteronomy 22. *What do you say, Jesus?* Well, the scribes and Pharisees were right. The penalty was death. But where's the man? It takes two to tango, after all. Where is the other adulterer? And how did they catch her? Who among these scribes and Pharisees is the peeping Tom? And what should be done about his sin?

But they don't care about that. They only want to test Jesus. And this woman's adulterous act provided an opportunity. So there Jesus is, bending down, writing with His finger on the ground as they keep pestering Him. And then Jesus stands up and says to them, **"Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her."** Then Jesus bends down again and writes more on the ground. And the scribes and Pharisees, one by one, walk away. This action of Jesus often presents the biggest challenge for us. What did Jesus write?

There are many speculative answers to this question. One of the common interpretations is that Jesus was writing down a particular sin for each person present. Another interpretation is that Jesus was writing down the names of their mistresses, names of women that they each had entered into adulterous relationships with. And these explanations lead to the scribes and Pharisees seeing their own sin in writing and being ashamed. Put in their places, confronted by their sin, they could only walk away.

Again, while these are common interpretations, they are all speculation. These verses simply don't tell us what Jesus was writing. For all we know, He could have been just drawing doodles and stick figures in the dirt. But based on the reactions of those in the crowd, it's a very plausible explanation.

The biggest challenge I find, assuming those speculative interpretations are close to being correct, is this: if you and I had been standing there, what would He have written about each of us? And how might we react? Would we make excuses? Would we run and hide?

The woman was caught in her sin. There was no doubt about it; she was guilty. The Pharisees could justly wield the law against her. The community justly could have wielded societal standards in condemnation of her. Jesus, the Son of God, the One who gave the Law, could have wielded it against her. But Jesus, after writing whatever He wrote, was the only one left standing there, the only one left who was righteous enough to condemn this woman.

"Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" He asked. **She said, "No**

one, Lord.” What would Jesus do? He was the only one without sin. He was the only one who could cast a stone. He was the only one who remained. And He remained merciful. **“Neither do I condemn you”** He said to her.

She gave no excuses. She was caught in her sin. She was guilty and she knew it. No one was left to condemn her, except the one who had the power to condemn her eternally. The only one who remained was her Lord. And with that word, “Lord,” uttered from her lips, she demonstrated that she knew who Jesus was.

Several minutes ago, before we made our prayer of confession, we recited the Law of God which was handed down from Moses to us. Ten points of the Law that show how we are supposed to live in relationship with God and with our neighbors. Ten points of the Law that we have broken. We may not always be caught by the crowds around us. We may not be dragged in for a potential stoning or other punishment. But we are caught in our sin. Whether we face consequences in this life or not, at the end of it, we too will come face to face with our Lord. And we, like the woman in our reading, will have no excuse. And yet, also like her, we can call out in hope to our Lord.

Psalm 130 says,

¹ Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD!

² O Lord, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my pleas for mercy!

³ If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?

⁴ But with you there is forgiveness, that you may be feared.

⁵ I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in his word I hope;

⁶ my soul waits for the Lord more than watchmen for the morning, more than watchmen for the morning.

⁷ O Israel, hope in the LORD! For with the LORD there is steadfast love, and with him is plentiful redemption.

⁸ And he will redeem Israel from all his iniquities.

Verses 3 and 4 of that psalm should sound familiar. With slightly different wording they are included in some of our liturgies. **“If you, O Lord, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness, therefore you are feared.”** We often say these words in connection with our confession of sins because this expresses the reality of what Christ has accomplished on the cross.

An entire library could be filled with books detailing the sins of any one of us. Like the woman caught in adultery, we also are without excuse. But also like the woman in our reading, we are with a Lord and Savior. The one who could cast the first stone instead chose mercy for the woman. And He chooses mercy for us also. The one without sin chose to take our punishment upon Himself on the cross. And by His cross, He wipes out the record of our sin, because the cross is God's eraser.

Colossians 2 says, **“you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him.”**

Because of the Cross of Christ, even *The Accuser*, Satan himself, has no grounds for calling you out on any of your sins, because the cross of Christ has erased them, the debt has been canceled, and your transgressions wiped out. No one is left to condemn you. Where your accusers once stood, your risen Lord now stands proclaiming to you, “neither do I condemn you.” Amen.