

In the Margins

Week 2: Spiritually At-Risk

John 8:1-11

If you have a Bible or Bible app you like to use, turn with me to John 8.

I've said it before, but, they didn't kill Jesus because they liked him. The religious leaders viewed him as a threat. He was a threat against what they believed about God. A threat that he would lead people astray. I think some of them were well-meaning in their concerns about Jesus, but for the most part, they just didn't like him. They saw Jesus as a spiritual risk.

And, what we see in the Gospels is their hatred towards Jesus just continues to grow. They were constantly looking for reasons to have him arrested, or ways to get rid of him. And they were willing to do whatever it took, even if it meant using people as pawns in their spiritual and political game.

We see an example of this in our text today. It's a text that, when you turn to it, you may notice a little footnote that says the earliest manuscripts don't have this account in them. Meaning, it was added later. That's concerning for some, but I kind of think of it like this...when I prepare a sermon, I have my notes next to me that I use while I'm typing it up. Not everything that's in my One Note file makes it into the sermon. In fact, sometimes, I will cut an entire paragraph out of my manuscript and past it to my One Note file in case I decide to throw it back in or use it later.

If someone came across that note years later and found that sermon, they might look at it and say, "That needs to be in there! What was Shawn thinking!" If they threw it back in, it's still my words, I just decided not to include them, whereas they did.

So, my conviction is that, while John may not have included this in his original Gospel, this is a true story that he witnessed first-hand. It's consistent with the life and ministry of Jesus. I think John wrote his letter and when people found his notes later, they saw this account in there and were like, "That needs to be included!"

And, I'm so glad they did because, to me, this is one of the most beautiful accounts of Jesus engaging spiritually at-risk people. People we may be able to see ourselves in. Look at our text. John 8, starting in **verse 2...(READ vs. 2)**

So, Jesus is in Jerusalem, walking around the courtyard of the Temple. John says it's dawn, which means the day is just starting. It's probably pretty quiet, maybe a little chilly as the sun rises over the Mount of Olives. There are a handful of people walking around the courtyard that probably recognized him, so they migrated towards him. Jesus might have sat down on a step underneath a tree and started teaching them.

We don't know what the morning Bible study was on that day, maybe it was about prayer, or loving your enemies, or forgiveness. Whatever it was, I imagine the people were hanging on

every word. Their stillness matched the stillness of the morning. But, this peaceful scene is soon interrupted. Verse 3...(READ vs. 3a)

“Caught in adultery.” There’s a lot said in those three words. First, you have this poor woman who had to be completely humiliated. These religious leaders had stormed into the house, threw back the curtains, and yanked this woman out of bed. We don’t even know if she had time to cover herself up first. They just grabbed her and marched her through the streets where people probably threw insults on her. “Shame on you!” “You’re pathetic!” “How could you?” As one author put it, “Jerusalem became a jury and rendered its verdict with glares and crossed arms.”

And to make it worse, they plopped her down right in front of Jesus. It continues...(READ vs. 3b-6a)

Clearly, the woman caught in the act of adultery was spiritually at-risk. She probably thought there was no way God could love someone like her. I imagine years of hurt and rejection left her with no sense of self-worth. She probably felt isolated and alone. Who knows the last time she had been to the temple, and now, here she was, naked and ashamed, her sin exposed to everyone around her and surrounded by men with stones in their hands, ready to be her judge, jury, and executioner.

But, I don’t think she’s the only spiritually at-risk person there that day. She’s certainly the most visible to everyone else, but I think Jesus sees the others. In fact, I bet Jesus would say the most spiritually at-risk people that morning were the ones holding the stones. Their hatred for him and self-righteous judgement of her had created a barrier that kept them from seeing Jesus for who he truly is.

You see, the night before this little show they were putting on, the religious leaders had a bit of a run-in with Jesus. It left them angry and hating him even more. This is just me talking here, but I think those same guys set this woman up. It takes two to tango, but did you notice there’s no mention of the man, only this woman. I think he was part of their plan to trap Jesus. They wanted him to say or do something they could use to discredit and destroy him.

These religious leaders, looking for a fight, paraded this poor woman through the streets and threw her before Jesus. They saw her as a pawn in their game, a person to be used, but Jesus saw her as a person, made in the image of God, and loved by Him. He saw through her guilt, through her shame, and into her heart. I imagine Jesus looked into her tear-soaked eyes and had compassion for her. So, how does he respond to their question about stoning her? (READ vs. 6b)

What an odd response, right? Was Jesus not socially aware enough to recognize the magnitude of the moment? Did the awkwardness of it all make him so uncomfortable that he panicked and started playing in the dirt, hoping they’d just all go away if ignored them long enough? Did Jesus not know how to respond to their question? Did the trap actually work?

I don't think so. In fact, I think Jesus knows exactly what he's doing. Verse 7...(READ vs. 7-8)
"Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." There's a lot of ideas about what Jesus was writing in the sand that morning. And, to be clear, we don't know. But, my favorite speculation is that Jesus, who knew the hearts of every man holding a stone in their hands, started writing their sins in the sand next to this woman whom they were casting judgement upon because of hers. Maybe...Jesus took this opportunity to remind them, and us, that no one is without their own sin.

Whatever he wrote, it got his point across because John says...(READ vs. 9)

I love this...Jesus stood on behalf of this woman. He placed himself between her and her accusers and silenced them. And then he turned his attention towards her...(READ vs. 10-11a)

Don't miss this...Jesus didn't argue for this woman's innocence. She was guilty. Caught in the act. There was no doubt about it. But, instead of casting judgement, Jesus extends grace. Jesus told her accusers to throw a stone if they were without sin, but there was only one sinless person in the crowd that day. Only Jesus had the moral authority to cast judgement on this woman and instead, he chooses to show her grace. And then, he sends her on her way by saying...(READ vs. 11b)

Jesus stands with her and gives her what she needs the most. He gives her grace, but then he gives her this charge: "Go now and leave your life of sin." Jesus doesn't condemn her, but he also doesn't condone her actions. He invites her into a new way of living in response to the grace she'd just received.

And the same is true for us. Grace gives us a new life and a fresh start. It doesn't condone our sin, but it doesn't condemn us, either. And, I imagine we're all well aware of what that voice of condemnation sounds like. It says things like, "You're not good enough and never will be." "You'll never beat this." "You failed – again!" "There's no way God could love you after what you've done."

These are the words of condemnation and, while the voice that speaks them might sound a lot like yours, they come straight from our accuser. Revelation 12:10 says that Satan stands before God day after day, hour after hour, accusing us of our sin. He points out each one of them and not only reminds God about them, but he reminds us, too.

Condemnation feels a lot like getting caught in the act and being surrounded by people with stones in their hands, ready to throw them right at you. There's no love in condemnation, only hate. But, Jesus offers us something different. Jesus gives us grace. In Romans 8:1, the Apostle Paul says there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. He goes on in verses 33 and says...(READ Rom. 8:33-34)

Just as he stood in defense of the woman in our text and interceded for her, Jesus is doing the same for you. Eugene Peterson paraphrases verse 34 like this, "Jesus is in the presence of God at this very moment sticking up for us." Jesus is for you. And yes, he knows your sin, but with each accusation Satan throws at you, Jesus is right there saying, "Yep, I died for that one, and that one..."

What Paul is saying in these verses is that, In the presence of God and in defiance of Satan, Jesus comes to your defense. We are guilty because of our sin, but Jesus took our guilt to the cross and gives us his freedom. Freedom from accusations. Freedom from condemnation. Freedom to walk in a new way of life that's been transformed by the grace of God.

That's what Jesus did for the woman caught in adultery that morning, and it's what he continues to do for us, whether we are the one caught red-handed in our sin, or we're the ones caught up in our own self-righteousness, throwing stones at the sins of others. Jesus offers us grace. He challenges us to look at our lives, look at our hearts, and follow him.

That's the message of the Gospel. Jesus moved towards the spiritually at-risk and showed them mercy and grace. He helped them experience God's love and find new life and a fresh start. And as a Church, we want to be about the things Jesus was about and move towards those Jesus moved towards. Which is why part of our vision is to minister to spiritually at-risk people. We put it like this: We will partner with others to tear down barriers people have to Jesus.

Whatever those barriers might be, we want to remove them. It might be a barrier that says there's no way God could love them. A barrier that says the Church is full of hatred. Is isolated from the world. Maybe the barrier is a previous experience that left a wound. We want to be a place where people can heal and fall in love with Jesus again.

But sometimes, tearing down spiritual barriers means partnering with others to give access to the life-changing good news of the Gospel in places that might not have a chance to hear it. Which is why we've partnered with Samaritans Purse and Operation Christmas Child for the past several years. And we want to invite you to join us this year. Check out this video...(show video).

Jesus said his mission was to seek and save the lost, and we want to partner with him in that mission. We want to move towards the spiritually at-risk people in our community and around the world and be a part of tearing down barriers that people have to Jesus. And we do it, hoping they will experience his grace and find the new life He invites us into.

We don't know what happened to the woman brought before Jesus that day, but my guess is that her life was forever changed by this one encounter with Jesus. And that same life change is available to you as well. If you're here today and you are living in condemnation. You're living with the guilt and shame of what you've done and you recognize your need for a Savior, your need for forgiveness and a fresh start, let today be the day you choose to follow Jesus and give your life to him. Let his grace transform your life today.