

You know, Jesus, they really hated him.

And do you know who hated Jesus the most? The religious leaders. The religious leaders who were most concerned about protecting their views of God and their understanding of Scripture. I think most of them were well intentioned, but they lacked humility, and they were wrong. The religious establishment that's all around Jesus, for the most part, grew to hate him because they felt threatened by him.

Ironically, he was a threat to what they believed about God. They were afraid of Jesus, and they were insecure. And it was fueled by their ignorance and their inability or their unwillingness to really deeply listen to what he was saying. Today, our story from John's Gospel has hatred as the backdrop, as the background. But in the foreground of this story, there is a surprising, if not stunning, maybe even shocking, response on the part of Jesus.

And today we talk about people who are at risk, which is what this new sermon series about. Tim did a great job of getting it started next week, and we'll have a couple more weeks after today. Today we think about people who are spiritually at risk, and that includes you, and it includes me. And so I will tell you, this is going to be encouraging. All right?

It's going to be encouraging. Our text today is John 7:53 through chapter eight, verse eleven. One day, a fairly new Christian Christ follower was reading her Bible, and she was reading down through John seven, and she got to verse 52, and then she saw this footnote, and she was a little confused because the footnote says the earliest manuscripts and many other ancient witnesses do not have John 7:53 through 8:11. A few manuscripts include these verses holy or in part after John 7:36, John 21:25, Luke 21:38, or Luke 24:53. So she took her confusion to her preacher, pastor, minister, and she said, I was reading my Bible, and I came to this, and I don't know what it means.

I don't understand.

He smiled and nodded, and he gently said he said, Listen, this could be a really long conversation. In fact, it would be a great class, a long class about how our Bible is formed. And I would love to do that, but a lot of people are not interested in it. But let me just say this to you. I believe this story, while it might not belong in John's Gospel, is a true story, and it's super consistent with the life and ministry of Jesus.

I believe it's inspired and I believe it's instructive for us. The woman was satisfied with his answer, said, okay. She said, But I would really like that class. I would love to have that class. And he said, Well, I would love to do that.

But in the meantime, in the meantime, read your Bible with confidence and this story in John eight, I'm going to tell you personally. This is a story that has helped me over and over again. It's deep, deep in my heart. Jesus went to the Mount of Olives at dawn. He appeared again in the temple courts where all the people gathered around him, and he sat down to teach them.

The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group and said to Jesus, teacher, 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 were using this question as a trap in order to have a basis for accusing him.

But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, if any of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her. Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground. At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left with the woman still standing there. Jesus straightened up and asked her, woman, where are they?

Has no one condemned you? No one, sir, she said. Then neither do I condemn you. Jesus declared, go now and leave your life of sin. Well, there are lots of ways to look at this story.

Some may say this is where that expression comes from. He that is without sin cast the first stone. And that's true. And someone else would say, well, to me, this is a story that's about morality or the lack thereof. It's a story about sexuality and how God steps in to save the day with his grace.

Theologians would say, well, yeah, okay. But it operates at a deeper level in John's Gospel. It's another story that shows how Jesus fulfills and supersedes the law of Moses. And it's a story where Jesus puts his authority up against the Jewish religious establishment of his day, and he confounds them yet again. All of that's true.

But this morning I want us to look at this story through the lens of people at risk. People at risk. And I want to reimagine the story with you. So let's go there. It's early in the morning.

The eastern sky is showing the promise of a new day. It's mostly quiet, but occasionally you can hear a dog bark or a rooster crow. Jesus has spent the night in Bethany with Lazarus, Martha and Mary, and he's now walking into the temple courts where a group of people have gathered. They're quietly talking to each other. They see him coming and they say, Good morning, Rabbi.

Good morning. And Jesus says, bokotov. Good morning in Hebrew.

He sits down and he begins to teach. I wonder what he taught that day. Do you have any ideas I wonder if he taught about prayer. Maybe he was beginning to teach about how to love your enemies. Maybe he was teaching about forgiveness.

The people were hanging on every word. They'd never heard anybody speak like this. They'd never heard anybody that was so rich and so deep and so compelling as Jesus is teaching. Suddenly, there's quite a commotion across the courtyard. The teachers of the law and the Pharisees, surrounded by a small mob, are making their way to Jesus.

And in between two of them, there is a woman clutching bedsheets, crying, trying to hide her shame as they drag her along. They shove her in front of the crowd, right at the feet of Jesus, and they make an angry, hateful, challenging statement. Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery in the law. Moses commanded us to stone such a woman. Now, what do you say?

Caught in the act? Can you imagine the humiliation? There she stands, clutching the bedsheets of infertility, and only moments before, she'd been in bed with a man who was not hers. And then there's a question. Where is the man?

The man is supposed to be stoned also. Where is he? Did he slip away? Or was he part of the plan? It was a setup, wasn't it?

The whole thing's a trap. The woman has been caught, but she's really only the bait. They're after a bigger prize, and that's Jesus. They want him to say something or do something that they can use to discredit and then destroy him. But think of that poor woman.

Can you see her? She stares at the ground. She's not pretty. She has no self esteem. Her disheveled hairs fallen over her face and hiding the tears running down her cheeks.

Tears of years of hurt and rejection. The tears run down her face and drip off into the dust. Occasionally, she peeks up through her hair, and she can see rocks in the hands of strong, angry men. And she wonders if this is how her life ends. Is this it?

Now, you'd almost expect Jesus to stand up and pronounce judgment on the hypocrites, but he doesn't. He doesn't condemn them.

What does Jesus do? He bends down and he writes in the sand. He doodles in the dirt. He writes in the dust. And the accusers, confused and annoyed by it, just keep hammering him, keep persisting.

Tell us, teacher. Tell us, what do you want us to do with her? When they kept on questioning him, he straightens up, and he looks at all of them, and he says, okay, let any of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her. He looks at him again, and he stoops down again, and he starts writing on the ground as they watch him. And as his words kind of settle, they settle into their minds and maybe into their hearts, and they begin to walk away.

One at a time. Who goes first? The older ones, they lead the way. And I'm guessing they probably toss their rocks as they walk away. So Jesus is left with the woman.

I imagine that he smiles at her, maybe a reassuring smile, and maybe she won't look at Him, but maybe he bends down and gets her chin and makes her look at Him so she can see love.

She looks, but she looks down again at her shame. And Jesus asks her a question. Woman where are they? Has no one condemned you?

No one, sir.

Maybe she thinks she'll get a lecture at this point. Maybe she thinks he'll just walk away like all the other men in her past have done. But Jesus stays, and Jesus stands with her, and he gives her what she most needs. He gives her a life giving promise and a life changing commission. The promise is this I don't condemn you the commission.

Go now and leave your life of sin.

This story shows how Jesus deals with people who are at risk spiritually for the woman. He rescues her from a death sentence. He saves her from destruction. He doesn't condemn her.

He saves her and she walks away into a new life, abundant and eternal in nature. It's like a resurrection. Now, here's an interesting twist in the story. Do you know who else Jesus doesn't condemn?

The angry mob led by the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law, the religious establishment. In this story, he simply challenges them to look at their lives, to look at their hearts. And when they take a glance, they also walk away. And they drop their rocks of hatred along the way. And I wonder about that a lot.

Did they hear his message that lacked condemnation? And did they look back over their shoulder and see what happens as Jesus gives this woman a life giving promise and a life changing commission? I don't know. But I do know that later on, some of the religious establishment convert to Christianity. And I wonder if this is one of the many seeds that were sown that later produce a harvest.

In some ways, we are all at risk spiritually. And I'll start here. If you don't have a relationship with Jesus, then let me lovingly and gently say, you are in the deepest danger you can possibly be in. Don't stay there. I'll say god's not mad at you, but he can't save you.

And what he simply wants is for you to come to Him, and he wants you to hear, hey, I don't condemn you. I don't condemn you. Just come to me and I'll give you rest and I'm going to give you a commission. Go now and leave your life of sin and embrace your new life of grace. I'll walk with you.

It's like a resurrection.

Maybe you've done that, but you've drifted away and you're just not sure where you stand. Or maybe you're like me. Sometimes you just get discouraged and you do something stupid and

you say something stupid. It just kind of keeps fueling that discouragement. And then, as the old song says, sometimes I'm prone to wander.

And then Satan shows up and makes you wonder. God doesn't really love you. You can't just forget it. You can't please him. And then shame shows up and it does its thing.

And we wonder, am I okay or not? Well, let me say this. If you've ever wondered about any of that, if you wonder how God reacts when you fail, then let me remind you and me of something. If you've ever wondered how God reacts when you're ashamed of what you said or what you did or even thought, then listen to me. Listen with me to this life giving promise and this life changing commission.

I don't condemn you.

Go now. Leave your life of sin max locatedo. Imagines this story, and he says, yeah, you should listen to what Jesus says. Listen carefully to what he says, but also watch what he writes. Watch carefully.

He's writing. He's leaving a message. But it's not in the sand, it's on the cross. And it's not a message written with his hand, but rather it's a message written with his blood. And his message is two words no condemnation.

No condemnation.

It doesn't matter what you've said, it doesn't matter what you've done, no matter how dark the canyon of shame, no matter how deep the gorge of guilt, the cross of Jesus says, I don't condemn you. And the empty tomb says, go now and leave your life of sin. Walk in, newness of life. For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him.

Whoever believes in Him is not condemned. But whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. So this woman, caught in the act of adultery, walks away forgiven. She walks into a new resurrected life. And we really don't know anything else about her.

She disappears. But we do know this. On that morning in Jerusalem, she saw Jesus, and Jesus saw her as she was. She was at risk of losing everything.

Jesus didn't condemn her. Instead, he invited her to die, to her old life and to embrace a new one. Now you have to wonder if she was at the cross on that Friday where Jesus was risking it all, giving up his life. Jesus risks it all because he believes that there is resurrection at the end, that a new life will follow that death. He's risking it all.

He's giving it up, giving his life up so that everyone at risk can find a new resurrected life. That includes me. That includes you. If this woman was at the cross, she would have recognized Jesus. And perhaps she looked at his nail pierced hands and remembered that his hands were the only ones that didn't hold rocks those days.

And maybe she remembers that tender touch on her chin. If she were there that day, she would have heard his voice on the cross and she would have recognized that it's weaker.

But the words of no condemnation are essentially the same when Jesus says, Father, forgive them, forgive them. So as we enter into a time of response, a time of reflection, a time of communion, I need to be reminded that there's no condemnation in Christ Jesus. Paul says it in Romans eight. He says, there is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus. We've been set free.

I need to be reminded of that often. And there's no reminder more powerful than communing with Jesus. We take the bread, which represents his body, we take the juice which represents his blood. We commune with Christ, and we're also communing with each other to say, look, we're all saved by grace, and it's a wonderful grace. We're reminded that through the deathbearer and resurrection of Jesus and through our baptism into that that reenacted that that we can hear Jesus say, I don't condemn you.

And if you fall and when you fall and you wonder, just get up and hear Him say, Go now, leave that behind you. Keep moving forward.

This is a really good time for all of us to reflect on where we are in our relationship with Jesus.

I think when we wander, we wonder if God is mad at us. That's not the case.

So this is a good day to come back if you've wandered off, it's a good day to begin if you've not started. So we're going to take communion. And during this communion time, if you want to respond in some way, you can come talk to Tim, you can come talk to me. Various people around the room just grab somebody and say, I need to talk. And we'll pray with you and we'll help you figure out what your next step is.

I just want to encourage you, don't leave today until you have a pathway to being right with Jesus. Let me pray. Father, we thank you for Your wonderful word of no condemnation, that it was embodied through Jesus. And we thank you that we can hear that. Father, as we take communion today, we're reminded of the expense, the costly nature of grace, the death of Jesus.

We think about his body, we think about his blood, and we don't stay there. Father, we remember the burial and we remember the resurrection, and we remember when we came to faith and we embodied our belief and our repentance in the waters of baptism. We remember

all that and help us to go forward, to leave behind the things that so easily entangle us and to live victoriously, empowered by your spirit. We thank you for all of that. In the name of Jesus.

Amen.

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