Providence Presbyterian Church

Rev. Dr. David Pettit

October 16th, 2022

John 8 – woman caught in Adultery

Jesus’ morning of teaching takes a bizarre turn. As Hudson likes to say, “that got dark fast.”

He is on the temple mount teaching. If you’ve seen renderings or reconstructions of the temple in Jesus’ day, you’ll notice huge courts on the temple mount, though outside of the temple proper. And off to one side of the temple mount were large colonnades or porticos, which were essentially pillars holding up large outdoor pavilions. It was here where teachers would gather with their students. It is here that we sometimes hear of Jesus teaching. It is here in our passage that Jesus sits, as a teacher does, in honor and authority, and is teaching those who gathered around him.

He is teaching about the Torah. He is explicating the scriptures, applying it to the times. For those who have participated in a bible study over the years, you understand the principle. Learning what the scriptures mean and how to apply it to contemporary life. And in the Jewish and rabbinic tradition, one turns the scripture over and over, asking questions, sparring with one another over various interpretations. In this tradition, there is often a fellowship that happens through disagreement, a sense that we learn through asking questions, we grow in our understanding through the back and forth. But in the end of the day, we are brothers and sisters and we go eat together, and all is well.

Now what is often conveyed in the gospel stories is that Jesus doesn’t always fit in well with the other teachers, Scribes, and Pharisees, that they question him in a way so as to test his adherence to the law or to discredit his authority. Interpretation here is not a friendly and well-meaning back and forth, but an adversarial test of one’s fabric and beliefs and credibility. Often these questions are hypothetical or theoretical. But in this case, it becomes quite literal and practical. Jesus is teaching, and before him is dragged a woman. And the theoretical questions of how we live out the law and glorify God are now displaced by a very public application. Here is a real-world test of how seriously Jesus takes sin and applies the law.

We have here a woman caught in the very act of adultery, not a theoretical or hypothetical, but a practical and actual occurrence. Like a politician in an election year, all eyes are on Jesus, waiting for him to make a gaff, or be caught stumbling over his words, or contradicting past statements, and thus his opponents will be able to discredit him, and to accuse him.

They brought this woman so as to test him. They have already looked up the literal prescribed punishment: to stone her. And the question is put to Jesus, what do you say? Surely, they are poised and ready to use anything he says as an argument against him. Words will not be easy to take back. And Jesus doesn’t want to sound soft on moral offenses. He doesn’t want to be accused of not believing in traditional marriage and values of the home. He doesn’t want to be caught in double talk, having just been teaching from the law, doesn’t want to be caught contradicting the literal reading of their scriptures. He doesn’t want to be accused of being weak and relativistic.

“Now what do you say?”

Jesus doesn’t answer.

We are told that the bends down and starts writing with his finger on the ground. Now many an interpreter has posited what Jesus might have been writing there with his finger. Verses of scriptures, the ten commandments which God writes with his finger, the Scribes’ sins? The most compelling of such proposals is that Jesus is doodling. Meaning, he is taking his time, not reacting to the urgency and anxiety of the moment, not feeling bound to their timing and insistence, not letting their manufactured crisis dictate his response. It says they kept questioning him, trying to get him to give them an answer, figuring that a rushed answer will be the most likely to indict him, to catch him in a gaff. But he just keeps messing in the dirt. And when he does stand to respond, he says, that they could go ahead and stone her, apply the law as you understand it, but the one who is sinless can be the first to get it started.

Who knows if they intended to stone her that day, or if they just wanted to discredit Jesus. But Jesus seems to call their bluff. He invites them to carry out their reading of the law, to be harsh and exacting, as long as they are without sin, because there might be some other severe punishment somewhere in the law for their own sin, if someone else chose to go looking.

I think Jesus casts light on the dynamics of the moment, more than the interpretation of scripture. He cast light on how we use scripture sometimes, how we use arguments, how we use people as examples of larger concerns or political games, and in the process, we lose sight of the life who has been caught in the crosshairs. He casts light on the power dynamics, on how some are able scrutinize others while their own choices, motives, etc, remain safely out of view and discussion.

For example, as parents of teenagers, we have been in that season when we are responsible for educating our children in the sensitive matters of human relations, if you know what I mean. And if there is one thing I hope they have picked up at this point is that it takes two to tango. I think it is safe to say that one does not commit adultery by oneself, just as a girl does not have an unwanted pregnancy by herself. And yet, in our passage only one person is dragged across town in public, hauled up the stairs onto the temple mount and thrust before Jesus there before all the pious teachers and students with the threat of prosecution. Where is the man? Is no one concerned with his part in the matter? Are men exempt from the law, exempt from the consequences? It is a funny thing how society often works, how one demographic has the authority to scrutinize another without the finger getting pointed back with the same force or effect. It is part of what we mean by the term often used these days; privilege.

Furthermore, marriage at this time was not exactly what James Dobson has led us to think. Men could have more than one wife, including tertiary or secondary wives, meaning women who were attached to the household and at his disposal but without the rights and inheritance that come with being a primary wife. Women could easily get caught up in the fine print, easily accused or dismissed or scrutinized or punished. The man rarely would be accused or scrutinized in the same way. Women who were characterized as loose or as prostitutes probably were often women in this category, who could be let go of a household and have no security, no family connections, vulnerable, desperate, and easily stigmatized.

Jesus seems aware of such dynamics. And while everyone is worked up by the issues and the larger implications and matters of politics and who the trustworthy teachers are, and who can best who in an argument, Jesus seems like the only one who has the humanity and experience of the woman in view. He seems to know she has been unduly accused and scrutinized and condemned. And in the end, he will admonish her to sin no more. He is not condoning misconduct, but he does not seem to think her mistakes are so much more severe than anybody else’s. He does not think that condemning her does the work of God. And he knows that the vitriol directed at her has little to do with her.

So, he loves her. He shows her compassion. He treats her as no worse than anybody else.

Now, as I was planning to preach on this passage, I searched my computer to see what I have said on this passage in the past. But it seems, I’ve never preached on this passage, or at least not in a very long time. I am pretty sure it is not included in the lectionary cycle on any regular basis. And if you’ve noticed the footnotes in your study Bible, you may see that this story is not in the earliest gospel manuscripts. It is generally considered a later addition to the gospel traditions, and in manuscripts where it does appear, often is inserted in different places. And since we tend to regard older as more authentic and truer, this passage is sometimes held in less regard, less confidence that it actually happened.

However, despite its lateness, there is a reason it has been included, because the characterization of Jesus seems very much in keeping with other gospel stories. For in the gospels, Jesus is often being questioned by the other scribes and pharisees, as they try to test or trap him. There is often a contrast between these traditional Jewish persons who are in the center of the tradition and the life of the temple with those that fall to the margins, like the lame and sick, the women and tax collectors, gentiles and other sinners. And Jesus always sides with compassion for these rather than judgement. He is aware of the power dynamics, and he is compassionate towards those who are vulnerable and who cannot improve their situations on their own, those often the subject of harsh criticism and scrutiny.

This story seems to be a consistent portrayal of the heart of Christ and how he responds to those that get caught in the crosshairs of others’ scrutiny and agendas. Rather, what I do find surprising is how slow we are to catch on to Christ’s character. While this is the consistent portrayal of Jesus, the church is so often concerned with fighting against the currents of culture. Concerned with moral agendas, quick to defend the standards of marriage and family and law and tradition. And yet, every time we see Jesus in these stories, caught in the tension between tradition and the muddiness of life, Jesus is showing compassion and love, and forgiveness and grace. I see Jesus calling out those in the majority and those in power, and defending those who are scrutinized and disempowered.

In my upbringing, Jesus’ behavior might be deemed as soft, as drifting towards relativism and ambivalence towards the truth. Our theme for these last five Sundays has been, “grant us soft hearts.” And I’ve suggested at moments that softness goes against our general cultural conditioning. To be soft on moral issues connotes weakness, conveys a lack of integrity and spine. To be soft is to go down the slippery slope of moral ambivalence and relativism. To be soft is to lack conviction, to be wishy-washy. To be soft is to refuse to take a stand.

But what Jesus demonstrates is a conviction that grace does more than judgement. Compassion is enough to effect change. Love, and a willingness to see the good shrouded in disgrace can restore someone. He knows that the law doesn’t always account for the particularities and complications of life. And for the religiously pious, or the personally or politically motivated, they know how to manipulate things for their own end. And Jesus often sees their arrogance or conceit as a block to that same grace, to that same knowledge of forgiveness, to that same restorative and redemptive possibility. And he sees the harm their conceit and arrogance brings on others.

Yes, Jesus is a softy. He chooses love over judgement, forgiveness over condemnation, equality before God, rather than scrutinizing the sins of some more than the sins of others. He who is sinless can cast the first stone.

Each of us, whether scrutinized or not, have our flaws, imperfections, and less than flattering moments that we hope others will forget. But each of us are loved, each have access to forgiveness, each invited into the grace that comes through Christ. We each are invited to live out the scriptures not in the theoretical and hypothetical realms of the classroom or an online chat, but in the muddiness and actuality of everyday life. And may we respond as Jesus does, full of grace and love, slow to act like we are above the fray, and soft towards those who are most vulnerable, compassionate towards those most in need of love and grace and advocacy.

And all God’s people said…

**8** while Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. 2Early in the morning he came again to the temple. All the people came to him and he sat down and began to teach them. 3The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery; and making her stand before all of them, 4they said to him, “Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. 5Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?” 6They 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. 7When 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.” 8And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground. 9When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders; and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. 10Jesus straightened up and said to her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” 11She said, “No one, sir.” And Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.”]]