

## Sticks and Stones

John 8:1-11

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Second Sunday in Lent *Sermon Series: The Journey of Stones*

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*While Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. 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, sir." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again."*

John 8:1-11

In Jesus' time, the very architecture of the temple revealed what Jesus was trying to reform. The design of the building named and protected degrees of worthiness. At the center was the Holy of Holies, which only the high priest could enter, and on only one day a year. This was surrounded by the court of the priests and the Levites, which only they could enter. Outside that there was the court of the circumcised Jewish men, which only they could enter.

The outer court of the temple was the court of the Jewish women, although during their menstruating years they could rarely enter the court, because of beliefs about blood, menstruation, labor, and ritual purity. Outside this entrance there was a sign warning non-Jews, who entered the temple, that they would be punished by death.

In the temple we see structured in stone what all religions invariably do—create degrees of insiders and outsiders. Jews defined all non-Jews as “gentiles”; some Catholics still speak of “non-Catholics”; and many Muslims today call non-Muslims “infidels.” You would think the three monotheistic religions would be more enlightened. Almost everybody seems to need some kind of sinner or heretic against which to compare themselves. (1)

Think about words that label a person or an act keep the system of purity in place.

In our passage today a group of people rushed up to Jesus to say some words, words of accusation and judgment and entrapment. Jesus was teaching one day in front of the Temple in Jerusalem and was suddenly interrupted by a group of very excited men who had in their midst a disheveled, frightened young woman. They said to Jesus, "You're not going to believe this, but we just caught this woman in the very act of adultery! Now, we know what Moses said should be done to a tramp like this. What do you say?"

It was a very awkward interruption. He realized that these people were not just interested in the law of Moses. They were trying to trap him so as to discredit him in the eyes of the authorities in Jerusalem.

What words would he say? How would he react? To me it is a sign that Jesus was the Incarnation of Divine Wisdom and Love, to see the way that he responded to this unexpected situation. In fact, the first thing he did was not to say anything. He did not answer their question at all, but instead he stoops over and begins to write with his finger in the dirt beneath his feet. This is the only time in the Gospels that we're told that Jesus wrote anything and, therefore, there has been great interest in what it was that he shaped with his finger.

One biblical commentator insists that he wrote, "Where is the man?" That is a pretty good question. Because adultery is not something you can do by yourself. Here was a situation where a man and a woman both broke the law of Moses, but given the sexism and patriarchal system of the first-century, only the woman was being held accountable. Only she was going to be punished. So he wrote on the ground to diffuse the energy of the mob.

If you'll think about the circumstances of this situation, that frightened woman probably was brought into that public place carrying most of her clothes in her hands. And so it was that in addition to being fearful, not knowing what was going to happen next, she also had the embarrassment of having all of those leering men looking at her. So he paused, he was quiet. He created a space so angry words would stop being flung.

It may have been the desire to do an act of incredible, ingenious kindness that caused Jesus to stoop over. In writing in the dust, he was able to deflect the eyes and words of these men and, therefore, gave this woman a chance to collect herself. If this, in fact, why he wrote in the dust, I think it is an expression of something in Jesus that was absolutely essential. And that is his heart was wondrously kind. Jesus never tried to add burdens to the already burdened. He never added more stones of burden to carry. Jesus never did things to people that made it more difficult given the difficult lives that they were living. He stopped words of humiliation and disgust and judgment and stopped an act of violent capital punishment.

By deflecting the attention of those men, Jesus conveyed to her: who you are is more important to me finally than anything that you have done.

Then he rises and delivers what is probably the one of best known one-liners in the scriptures: let the one among you who is without sin cast the first stone. He takes the violence and judgment of the group that was directed outward and he turns the energy inward. And in the process he transforms it into a moment of reflection, contrition. Instead of focusing on her act of moral failure, he challenges each one to look within, to look within and see their brokenness, their regrets, their hurtful actions, their failures.

He bent down again. And then they went away one by one. They arrived as a group, a throng, but left one by one, each one thinking about their own broken vows, their own shadow places.

Then he addresses the woman – the first time he spoke directly to her. He sees her. He does not condemn her. The words he speaks in love set her free. His actions and his words show she is worthy and not worthless. Jesus showed no interest in maintaining purity systems, or closed systems of any kind, because they only appeal to the ego and lead no one to God. Jesus actively undercut these systems. He refused to use words that reinforce some as an outsider or unclean or unworthy.

I have been watching the PBS series –*The Black Church- This Is Our Story, This Is Our Song*. Powerful. As a white person who has grown up in church, I have so much to learn. It prompted me to start reading a book by one of my spiritual mentors, Howard Thurman. A preacher, writer, mystic and leader, Thurman was one of the principal architects of the modern, nonviolent civil rights movement and a key mentor to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. In this book *Jesus and the Disinherited* published in 1949, he asked this question - What does Jesus offer to a people who live with their backs against the wall?

From Thurman's perspective, *"wherever the spirit of Jesus appears, the oppressed gather fresh courage; for he announced the good news that fear, hypocrisy, and hatred, the three hounds of hell that track the trail of the disinherited, need have no dominion over them."* (2 - pg. 29)

Thurman makes a case that love will be the source of change.

*The first step toward love is a common sharing of a sense of mutual worth and value. This cannot be discovered in a vacuum or in a series of artificial or hypothetical relationships. It has to be in a real situation, natural, free. (pg. 98)*

He heard this truth about mutual worth and value at services and from his grandmother. He wrote:

*When I was a youngster, this truth was drilled into me by my grandmother. The idea was given to her by a certain slave minister who, on occasion, held secret religious meetings with his fellow slaves. How everything in me quivered with the pulsing tremor of raw energy when, in*

*her recital, she would come to the triumphant climax of the minister: "You – you are not (niggers). You – you are not slaves. You are God's children." (Pg. 50)*

In the last chapter of *Jesus and the Disinherited* which focuses on love, Thurman recounts the story of the woman accused of adultery.

*This is how Jesus demonstrated reverence for her personality. He met the woman where she was, and treated her as if she were already where she now wished to be. In dealing with her he "believed" her into the fulfillment of her possibilities. He stirred her confidence into activity. He placed a crown over her head which for the rest of her life she would keep trying to grow tall enough to wear. (pg. 106)*

No stones were thrown at that woman that day.

With his words, with his silence, with his actions, Jesus showed her reverence and love.

As a church and individuals, how will we pray and act and listen and speak in ways that we demonstrate a sense of mutual worth and value of people who have their backs against the wall? Let us go inward to discover where the Spirit is leading and then be courageous in our response. Amen.

1) Richard Rohr, "Redrawing the Lines of God," Center for Action & Contemplation, 3/5/15  
<https://cac.org/redrawing-lines-god-2015-03-05/>

2) Howard Thurman, (1949) *Jesus and the Disinherited*, [E-book]. Boston: Beacon Press.