

Remember, BPC
John 7:53-8:11
February 11, 2024
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Prayer: Holy God, may your word illuminate what we cannot see. Set us free from the fears that imprison us. Grant us courage and compassion to embody Christ, your Living Word, so we can join you in bringing heaven to earth. Amen.

1 And Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. **2** Early in the morning he returned to the temple. All the people gathered around him, and he sat down and taught them. **3** The legal experts and Pharisees brought a woman caught in adultery. Placing her in the center of the group, **4** they said to Jesus, “Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of committing adultery. **5** In the Law, Moses commanded us to stone women like this. What do you say?” **6** They said this to test him, because they wanted a reason to bring an accusation against him. Jesus bent down and wrote on the ground with his finger.

7 They continued to question him, so he stood up and replied, “Whoever hasn’t sinned should throw the first stone.” **8** Bending down again, he wrote on the ground. **9** Those who heard him went away, one by one, beginning with the elders. Finally, only Jesus and the woman were left in the middle of the crowd.

10 Jesus stood up and said to her, “Woman, where are they? Is there no one to condemn you?”

11 She said, “No one, sir.”

Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you. Go, and from now on, don’t sin anymore.”

I love preaching on texts that include women, since they are few and far between, and if I were stranded on a desert island with only one gospel, I would want John. So when I was asked if I wanted to continue with the sermon series based on Frances Taylor Gench’s book, [Encounters with Jesus](#), I did not hesitate to say yes.

Oh, but I should have known better. As is so often the case, the more I dug into the story, and the more commentaries I read, the less I could see straight. I must confess: I love hearing Jesus tell this woman he didn’t condemn her, but that last line, “...go and sin no more,” sounds impossible, and unfair. The men invited to reflect upon their sin walk away without this admonition. One reading of this story is that it perpetuates the patriarchal practices it intends to disrupt!

This is a tricky story with a bit of a wonky history that might also have suffered from the patriarchal practices it reveals. What do I mean by this? Well, the earliest and best Greek manuscripts of John don’t contain this story. And by the time it does show up in later manuscripts, it moves around. Sometimes it appears in other sections of John. Sometimes it even shows up in the gospel according to Luke! What is going on?

One way scholars explain its roving history is by suggesting it might not be original to John or Luke. It might actually be an independent piece of Jesus tradition rooted in the earliest orally transmitted stories. It has also been suggested this story might be missing from early manuscripts because it contradicted the early church's more punitive response to adultery. The freedom Jesus offers her, his lack of condemnation, was embarrassing—dangerous, even! This sounds plausible as many a church father and theologian have gone on record to argue that just because Jesus doesn't condemn the woman it doesn't mean she shouldn't be punished. Case in point: reformation theologian and Presbyterian church father John Calvin preached:

“Those who deduce from this [story] that adultery should not be punished by death must, on the same reasoning, admit that inheritances should not be divided, since Christ refused to arbitrate between two brothers. Indeed even crime will be exempt from the penalties of law if the punishment of adultery is remitted, for the door will then be thrown open to every kind treachery...”

Calvin's words reveal the threat the text posed and (poses?) to the social order. Let sexual sin go unpunished and everything else will fall apart. I'm grateful for the mouths, ears, and hearts who weren't afraid to transcribe this hot potato of a story. I especially love that this story found a home here, in the gospel of John, where Christ embodies the true light that enlightens everyone—the light that the darkness can never overcome.

So let's turn to the story itself to find the light it offers us today. The setting is the Temple—not inside—but outside. It's morning. Jesus's followers have gathered to learn from him. Responding to their eagerness, he sits down to teach, but he's interrupted by a group of men. They have brought a woman with them, presumably against her will. They place her in the center. She has no name and no ally, but now all eyes are on her.

She's been bad, they say. Adultery. The law commands us to stone her. What do you say? The law of the day did indeed support the death penalty, but it didn't mention stoning. One more thing, punishment was prescribed for both the man and the woman, but her partner was absent. Why was he missing if she was caught in the very act? Maybe he ran away. Maybe he was a Roman soldier and therefore beyond their reach. Perhaps the whole thing was made up. The narrator says what the men were really after was the opportunity to accuse Jesus of being wrong. It's possible that this comment isn't original to the story. Either way, it's important to note that comments such as these—and there are many of them in John's gospel—have contributed to anti-Judaic prejudices we must leave behind. The Pharisees and legal experts were protecting the values of their institutions. They didn't understand what Jesus was up to, and they judged his teachings, and actions as threatening. Whether they approached him with a real question or a trap, Jesus didn't engage. He bent toward the ground to

write something with his finger, so now all eyes are no longer on the woman, and the men have a chance to let it go—to change their minds—to walk away.

Oh, but we are not very good at letting go when we feel a loss of control. We like to hold on tighter to our judgments. There's safety in certainty, the safety that comes from living in a cage. "Out beyond ideas of wrong and right there is a field," the 13th century Persian poet says, "I'll meet you there." That's where freedom lies. But the men aren't interested in freedom. Jesus has threatened the social and religious order that gave them their feelings of power. And he will continue to threaten their certainty that they can use this woman as an object—as a means to their end.

I love this cool, calm, collected portrait of Jesus. He knows who he is. The Word of God made flesh is at-home and at-one with God and with humans. As I imagine his centeredness, his at-one-ness and at-home-ness with God and all of creation, I feel for these men. They are attempting to protect themselves and their power in the only way they know how. I get that. I've done that. They don't know what they don't know. The privilege of privilege is not knowing your privilege. None of us can see everything or know everything. We can't be right all of the time. We are products of all sorts of influences. We've learned patterns of behavior and absorbed values that harm others, and imprison us, just like these men. To their credit, when Jesus offered them the opportunity to look at themselves, it seems they realized that a system ruled by judgement and condemnation was not good for them, either. As the scales fell from their eyes, they learned to align with God's ways.

The implications of this story are tremendous when we bring it into our context. We can't avoid swimming in racist, sexist, classist, ableist, heterosexist, etc., etc., waters that influence us to privilege one idea, one value, one group over another. But God's realm doesn't operate like that. In God's realm everyone matters equally—everyone is worthy of dignity, autonomy, and grace. That's the world God calls us to long for, to envision, and to manifest. Like the people in this story, Christ invites us to examine our inherited values and rules and behaviors without fear of condemnation to let go of what is keeping us and keeping others from thriving. Judgement and condemnation are tools of enslavement. They do not belong in God's realm. It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Freed people free others.

I know that our Christian tradition has gotten this wrong often. Our collective complicity with systemic oppression is dispiriting. All too often the religious establishment has absorbed and embodied the ways of the world that keep everyone from equally thriving. But let's not confuse Christ and religion. Just as Jesus disrupted systems that gave one group power or control over another, the Cosmic Christ continues to invite us into this work. Like the men in today's story, it starts by letting go of the judgments and condemnations that keep us and others stuck. We can do this because we are not left alone to do this work. Christ's at-home-ness and at-oneness with God is freely shared with all of us. You can't earn it. It's yours already.

I've been digging into Celtic Christianity to prepare for a trip to Iona. At the heart of Celtic Christianity is the belief that the light and life of Christ runs through all of creation, therefore everyone and everything is sacred. Sin exists not because we are born bad, but because we suffer from soul forgetfulness. Celtic teacher and author John Phillip Newell writes that Celtic Christianity is "at its core the conviction that we essentially need to keep listening to what the soul already knows."

In times past this belief has been judged and condemned a heresy by the religious establishment. But I see a parallel between it and how Jesus approaches the Pharisees and legal experts. *Listen to what your soul already knows. No one is without sin. Do you want to be judged according to the standards with which you judge others? That way leads to death. Loving others as you want to be loved, giving to others what you want to receive—that way leads to life for us all.*

John Phillip Newell tells the story of a time he spoke about Celtic Christianity in Ottawa. An elder of the Mohawk tribe had been invited to comment on the connection between Indigenous and Celtic wisdom. Newell began his talk saying that Celtic tradition invites us to seek the light of Christ in each other, and in everything that has being. When he finished his talk, the Mohican approached Newell with tears in his eyes and said,

"As I have been listening to these themes, I have been wondering where I would be tonight, I have been wondering where my people would be tonight, and I have been wondering where we would be as a Western world tonight, if the mission that had come to us from Europe centuries ago had come expecting to find light in us." (Sacred Earth, Sacred Soul, p. 12).

The missionaries who came to the new world didn't come looking for the light of Christ in the people they encountered, so they colluded with the forces of colonialism to devastating effect. The Pharisees and legal experts couldn't see the light in the woman they brought to Jesus because they were steeped in religious and patriarchal rules that enabled them to treat her in ways they did want to be treated. Not until the life and light of Christ set them free.

Christ comes to set us free from the values and behaviors that keep everyone and everything from thriving. May we remember what the world wants us to forget. We are all fearfully and wonderfully made, beloved creations in whom the light and life of the Cosmic Christ dwells. We are all in this together. What helps one community thrive helps all of us thrive. What's best for you is what's best for me. Christ in you, Christ in me, Christ throughout the whole creation. Be free to remember. Amen.

- Jen Brothers, 2024