

John 8:2-11 The Woman Caught in Adultery



Just imagine...

...you are in church on a Sunday morning. The first songs have been sung, the children have gone to Sunday School, and the Bible passages have been read. The preacher enters the pulpit... and all of a sudden the main door is flung wide open, a woman bursts into the room chased by an uncontrollable crowd of people. Their faces are contorted by anger and unrestrained rage... their blood is boiling as they hold weapons in their hands to harm, hurt and destroy.

The haunted woman runs up to the altar, clings to it as if to find protection there: churches as shelters, places to seek asylum, realms of peace.

The haunted woman up front, the mob somewhere half way down the aisle...

What would you do?

Would some of you stand up and form a circle round the woman? ...hold her by the hand, talk to her? Ask where she comes from and what the problem was?

Would others try to hold back the crowd? Talk to them, calm them down?

Would some sneak out quietly – fearing the worst?

Would I leave the pulpit and try to protect her, lead her gently out, shake off the mob? How would I do it? My brain would probably work like mad, my heartbeat hit the ceiling, and my blood freeze... What would I say? And do? Would I stand up for her very life? Would I defend her? Fight for her?

And if so, would the church in less than a second turn into a place of disaster and bloodshed?

It could well be...

...but not so in the Bible.

Let me read to you from the gospel of John, chapter 8 verses 2 to 11:

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?»

11 She said, «No one, sir.» And Jesus said, «Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.»

There is a debate about whether this passage was originally part of John's gospel. The incident rings true to what we know of Jesus' character. But the language, this type of the story would fit much better to the way the evangelists Luke and Mark were writing and composing.

In the early church, when the canon (another word for the Bible as a whole, as we hold it in our hands today)... when the canon was put together by the church fathers, this story of the Woman Caught in Adultery was pushed about like an unloved piece of furniture.

People thought it was a provocation, an encouragement to sin even, and they didn't want to have it. The first proof of the existence of this remarkable story dates back to the year 125 after the birth of Christ. However, it only entered the position in which we find it in our New Testament today in the 3rd century after Christ. For over a century it was pushed about, moved from here to there, hidden and avoided...

And here we are, and we still have it: the story of a woman found not guilty and offered a new way of life. Dynamite to patriarchal and legalistic thinking then and now.

But back to the narration:

The whole incident took place in the temple. Bringing this woman to Jesus was part of the strategy of the scribes and Pharisees to discredit Jesus. They thought that the only options Jesus had were either to say "leave her alone" or "stone her". The first would suggest that he did not take her sin seriously enough, and the other (although required by the law) would lead people to doubt whether Jesus did seriously live out his message of love and mercy.

Jesus responded by writing something on the ground. We are not told what he wrote... but maybe it has been related to what he then said to them: "If anyone of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her."

By saying this, Jesus shifted the focus from himself and the woman to her accusers. He neither denied the validity of the law nor condemned the woman to death.

The accusers left, one by one, the elders first...

The story consists of three scenes. The action of it begins, when they – the scribes and Pharisees – bring the woman and ask Jesus to judge her case.

The second scene begins when Jesus bends down and writes on the ground with his finger. He writes on the ground to indicate his unwillingness to spring the trap that has been set for him. He refuses the typical role of a Jewish male of his day to re-establish law and order and the honour of the whole people harmed by the act of adultery – that is how people thought in those days.

Nevertheless, the Pharisees continue to press him for an answer, so Jesus stands up and addresses them directly.

The last scene of the story begins, when Jesus bends down and writes on the ground again. While he is doing that, the crowd departs.

Jesus stands up again and speaks to the woman twice. And when he finishes speaking to her, she is FREE to go, just as the rest of the crowd did.

A careful reading of this story shows that Jesus' focus is not on the woman alone, but is evenly divided between the scribes and Pharisees and the woman. Jesus bends down and writes twice. And twice he stands to address his conversation partners.

What indeed is striking about this story – and also upsetting traditions – is that Jesus treats the woman as the social human equal of the scribes and Pharisees. Jesus speaks to both sets of characters about sin. His words to the scribes and Pharisees “Let anyone among you who is without sin, be the first to throw a stone at her”, focus on the past. These words let them all face the way they had lived until that moment. All of them. Men and women, saint and sinners. No exception!

Jesus' words to the woman “Neither do I condemn you. Go your way and from now on do not sin again”, focus on the future. They express the way the woman can live from now on! ...and they express an offer to everyone present to do the same: Go your way and from now on do not sin again...

Jesus invites both sides, the scribes and Pharisees and the woman, to begin life anew in the present moment. They all are invited to give up old ways and enter a new way of life.

When the scribes and Pharisees brought the woman who had been caught in adultery to Jesus they dehumanize her. Here in the graphic on the front page of your bulletin she stands there all alone, her back to a tree, the gazes of people on her and her body, a woman chased by the eyes, and the lust, and the judgment of the men around. Two, right at the bottom of the picture, look away. Man or woman? Hard to say.

Some are holding stones in their hands. Some reach out to grab a stone. Some look as if they are all ready to throw the stone

No one is at the woman's side.

And Jesus - Jesus sits and writes on the ground, - untouched by the others in a physical way, but emotionally he is the centre of the tragic and crucial moment. He is right there. Even though he doesn't look at the woman, he is aware of her, of her fear, her despair, the threat this angry mob means to her.

Jesus is there – not at her side, but at the heart of the whole situation.

When the scribes and Pharisees dehumanize the woman, they turn her into an object for debate and discussion. But Jesus shows them that the focus lies not only on the woman and her sexual behaviour, her sin... The text does not isolate

the woman's sin. Nor does Jesus single out the woman as a sinner. The text identifies all the characters as in need of and receiving an invitation to new life. Jesus does offer grace and mercy to sinners in this story, but the offer is extended equally to scribes and Pharisees and men and women. And the command to the woman to begin a new life, is a command to all of them.

When we looked at this text in a home group some weeks ago, we were all equally touched by almost the same parts of the story. The "neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again" was the absolute favourite, followed by "he bent down and wrote on the ground" and this atmosphere of such peace of mind in the middle of a crisis – so much sitting down, bending down, writing, remaining calm and cool headed... We all felt that this story of forgiveness that could have so easily ended in bloodshed and murder, was filled with overwhelming patience, peace and trust.

There is this God in whose name Jesus can forgive not only the woman but everybody. All those present in the temple on this extraordinary day 2000 odd years ago were given a chance to start their lives all over again. They are all invited to live a new life and learn from the one who did not let himself be carried away by laws, activism or rage, but sat still and waited quietly. ...and by doing so gave the community, those outrageous people looking for revenge, a chance to somehow sort themselves out.

By bending down and writing on the ground, Jesus gave the furious mob a chance to hold on a moment or two. And when he then spoke he gave everybody present a chance to change their minds without losing face.

Jesus' calm behaviour, while everybody else ran wild and became agitated, helped the men of Jerusalem to turn from violence to non-violence, from oppression and revenge to freedom and forgiveness. Peace won over danger and death!

Jesus' movements expressed physically what he then expressed verbally: be slow to condemn, be careful to judge, rest a while and reflect, discover who you are and see the others as equally vulnerable and lovable human beings.

Don't immediately rise to action and argue and fight, but wait and see and give others a chance to learn and understand and repent.

I must say, I personally admire Jesus for his reaction in this significant story! And I ask myself: "Who on earth do you have to be deep inside to stay so fearless and firm in the face of threat and danger?"

Yes - ok: you've got to be the son of God: at peace with yourself and your God, not depending on what others think of you..., not having the need or urge to always and in all situations have to be everybody's darling...

And, believe it or not: this is an invitation given to all of us; we, too, are the sons and daughters of God. We can be at peace with ourselves, if we just understand how profoundly we are loved by an unconditionally loving God. We can be at peace with God. We can live our lives peacefully, thoughtfully and simply relying on the deep knowledge that we are all once and for all wrapped and held in God's great love.

We can top this thought by reminding ourselves and others that God loves us even at times when we don't love ourselves, and when others don't love us, and our love towards them seems to have grown cold, too.

A second precious reminder is the image of God, Jesus is showing to us through his behaviour in this story of the woman caught in adultery: God does not condemn. God gives new chances, and every day, every hour is the chance for a new beginning!

God forgives and thus throws doors wide open into a future that holds in store a totally new way of life, - determined by freedom and mutual respect, by love and peace and the ability to wait... wait for the changes that can bring us closer to the kingdom of God which we are both living in and heading for.

“Go your way...” Jesus says to the woman. Wait a moment, stop running away, stop letting them chase you. Hold on a minute, think, find out who you are, and what you are longing for..., and “do not sin again”.

Take all those stones not thrown at you but put down in regret, and build a wall of remembrance. Bend down and write on these stones. Make them signposts to show the world the new ways in which the people of God can live. These ways must not necessarily always be nice and easy, but God is with you on your way.

Don't go back. Step fearlessly forward and discover the fullness of life, and listen to the voice of God whispering in your ear: be strong and courageous, do not be frightened or dismayed, for I am with you wherever you go.

May I invite you to remember some of my words from the beginning?

I talked about “the haunted woman up front, the mob half way down the aisle, and I asked you what you would do...”

I pray that we all would
stand still,
hold on,
bend down
and write on the ground:
write in the language of a loving and forgiving God,
and hereby open doors
to places
which offer to us and others
a future of happiness and peace.
Amen.