

John 7:53-8:2 *Everyone went to his home but Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. Early in the morning He came again into the temple, and all the people were coming to Him, and he sat down and began to teach them.*

This is how today's Jesus Encounter begins – with Jesus sitting down to teach in the temple at the end of the feast of Tabernacles. But before we should even commence our commentary, we must acknowledge that this passage of Scripture through verse 11 is much in dispute. In fact, some of your Bibles omit it altogether, and most of your Bibles have a qualifying footnote about this passage not being in the earliest manuscripts. So I believe a comment about the value of studying this story is appropriate.

THE VALIDITY OF THE ACCOUNT

First, you probably know that we have no original manuscripts of our Bible. The earliest New Testament manuscripts we possess are from 300-500 A.D., handwritten copies from the originals. These earliest manuscripts are distinct in that they are written in all caps, or in what is called "uncial" script – rounded, unjoined letters from which modern capital letters are derived.

Of the 9 best early manuscripts of John's gospel, 6 of them omit the "Adulterous Women" story completely. 2 of them leave a blank space where it should have been. And yet one of them has the story intact in its text. Curious and intriguing!

St. Jerome included the story in his Vulgate from 382 A.D. – a Latin translation of the Bible that became the standard for the church for centuries. St. Augustine also knew of the story in the late 300's when he comments that it was removed by some copyists because "some were of slight faith" and "to avoid scandal." This hints that the story of the adulterous women was considered "dangerous" by some as a justification for a light view of adultery and chastity as virtues.

We have an even earlier occurrence of the story around 200 A.D. in a survived volume entitled "Apostolic Constitutions," in which the story is told to bishops who were too strict. Interesting.

We also note that the content of the story does not violate what we know of Jesus in his forgiveness and non-judgmental attitude. John 3:17, we recall, has Jesus saying "God sent not His Son into the world to condemn ..." and the text that follows in 8:15 has Jesus saying "I am not judging anyone."

Though we cannot be sure that the story is in the originals, neither can we prove it was not – and there is some evidence to show it might well have been. Further, the story is consistent with the Jesus we know, and so I conclude (along with many prominent New Testament scholars such as William Hendrickson) that "the story should be retained and taught for our benefit." And so we proceed with our study of this encounter.

John 8:3-11 *The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman caught in adultery, and having set her in the center of the court, they *said to Him, "Teacher, this woman has been caught in adultery, in the very act. Now in the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women; what then do You say?" They were saying this, testing Him, so that they might have grounds for accusing Him.*

But Jesus stooped down and with His finger wrote on the ground. But when they persisted in asking Him, He straightened up, and said to them, "He who is without sin among you, let him be the first to throw a stone at her." Again He stooped down and wrote on the ground. When they heard it, they began to go out one by one, beginning with the older one.

And He was left alone, and the woman, where she was, in the center of the court. Straightening up, Jesus said to her, "Woman, where are they? Did no one condemn you?" She said, "No one, Lord." And Jesus said, "I do not condemn you, either. Go. From now on sin no more."

ABOUT THE ACCUSERS

The Jewish religious leaders had every right to be concerned about sin and to expose it for the purity of their nation. But our text makes clear that their motivation for this interrupting of Jesus' teaching was not for concern over sin, but to force Jesus into a controversial corner. To refuse to stone to death would have been going against the law of Moses. To call to stone would have been going against not only the Roman law which forbade Jews from taking life, but going against His own kingdom teachings of love, forgiveness and new life in Christ.

The Pharisees considered that spiritual authority meant condemning and punishing sin rather than healing sin and restoring the sinner. And we who have been given spiritual authority as God's representatives must be careful not to assume a similar misguided posture. We have been given the ministry of reconciliation, not of condemnation.

People in sin can easily be seen as a "thing" or "case" for us to make our point, if we are not careful. Similarly, a patient to a doctor can become just "the one with pancreatic cancer" or the "diabetic," rather than a person with a problem to be comforted and hopefully healed. I remember the movie "Patch Adams" where Patch, as a caring intern dared to ask of a patient, "what's his name?" rather than just have the patient identified by his illness.

And this reminds me that God said to Moses, "I know you by name." (Exodus 33:17) And we know that we who are followers of Christ have our names written in the Lamb's book of life. We find that the Bible is a book of names – often in long lists. Clearly God cares about us as individuals and cares about our personal identification.

May we never let the person with a cardboard sign become simply a "thing" to us, but may we know that he has a name, is a person of worth and a soul for which Jesus died to save. To the Pharisees, the women taken in adultery was but an "instrument" by which to trap Jesus.

ABOUT JESUS' REACTION

He paused in His teaching for the greater importance of the person in need. He loved by showed pity and concern. He showed respect for the woman by speaking to her in a gentle and caring manner. He offered a second chance, believing the best for her. And he dismissed her accusers with a challenge to their right to condemn and judge. Observe, listen and learn from our Master.

So what is the writing in the ground about? We can't be sure. But we do know that "pregnant pause" can be used for the effect of both reflection and impact. Jesus might have used the moment for all the people to access their own sin in light of this woman's obvious sin. In other words, it might have been a "selah" moment – "stop and think about it." And/or some have suggested that He was writing the sins of the religious leaders in the sand. This possibility is amplified when we realize that the usual word for "writing" is "graphein." But John uses the word "katagraphein" which can mean to "write a record against." For instance, in the book of Job 13:26 Job says "You write bitter things against me" and the Greek translation is "katagraphein."

We can't be sure what Jesus was doing, but He got His point across when He finally answers them. He was referencing Deuteronomy 17:7, where the Law reads: "The hand of the witnesses shall be first against him to put him to death..." That they had found the woman "in the act of adultery" meant that they had been eye-witnesses, and were therefore to be the first to administer the stoning for which they were asking. It is also worth noting that when Jesus says, "let him who is without sin ...", the word for "sin" implies of mind as well as of action. Jesus is in effect saying, "let him who has never even thought of impure sexual relations be the first to throw a stone at her." Wo!

How easily I can make a mental judgment about someone's sinful state. And metaphorically I am ready to throw the first stone. But Jesus reminds me that I have been forgiven and I have been transformed and I have had hundreds of "second chances" given. Paul writes to the Corinthians about many despicable acts in their midst such as fornication, idolatry, adultery and homosexuality

and then writes:

1 Corinthians 6:11 *“Such were some of you, but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.”*

Later in 1 Corinthians Paul describes the essence of “agape” love and writes:

1 Corinthians 13:7 *[Love] believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.”*

To me, this means that love believes that anyone can change through the power of God’s love and hopes that it will happen, enduring whatever it takes to give that one a second, third and yet another chance.

THE CHANCE TO CHANGE

Jesus said to her, “Woman, where are they? Did no one condemn you?” She said, “No one, Lord.” And Jesus said, “I do not condemn you, either. Go. From now on sin no more.”

This final word of Jesus to the woman leaves many questions as to what happened next. We never learn of her salvation or transformation. We can guess, but we cannot know. And that’s how it is with many of our encounters. We offer the love of God; we encourage to receive Jesus; we invite to a better life of following after Jesus – but we often never know the outcome.

“Go” said Jesus. This implies “go and make a new life for yourself in the love and forgiveness I have offered you. Did she? We don’t know.

“From now on, sin no more” is the challenge to repent and turn the corner on that drinking problem, that lust attraction, that anger issue. For her it was the challenge to live a life of purity through the inner strength God would give if she would only receive it. Did she? Maybe, maybe not.

But the offer was sincere. Her ability to be transformed by the power of God was real. Her second chance was a wide open door to make a new life. And so is the offer we must make in our encounters.

Everyone wants another chance. And everyone gets another chance by the grace of God. But it’s not a second chance on our own terms. It must always be on God’s terms only. He wants all of us, or nothing. No compromises. Simply, “go, and sin no more.”

A FINAL OBSERVATION

John 7:12 *When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”*

The story of the adulterous woman (and hopefully the former adulterous woman) is over. But the narrative goes on through verse 20. We only have time to note the verse that follows the story. And so very poignant and appropriate it is. We have the second of Jesus’ “I AM” statements, this time “*I AM the light of the world.*”

Light gives illumination where there was darkness, visibility where there was blindness, direction where there was confusion and hope where there was despair. And that is exactly what Jesus offered to the adulterous woman and offers to all who would find the path to God and His kingdom.

May we in our encounters offer the light of God. While Jesus was in the world, He was the Light of the world. (John 9:5). But now that He is gone to be our High Priest in heaven, he says:

Matthew 5:14,16 *You are the light of the world. Let your light so shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.*