

John 7:53-8:11

John Sermon Series: Stone Drop

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Once again, we find ourselves wrestling with a little ironic behavior akin to this gospel of John.

Maybe you saw the double brackets around John 7:53-8:11 – maybe you read the footnote which reads, “The most ancient authorities lack 7.53-8.11; other authorities add the passage here or after 7:36 or after 21:25 or after Luke 21:38, with variations of text; some mark the passage as doubtful.”

Whelp!?

This story is probably not germane to John’s gospel.

The reference to the Mount of Olives in 8:1 is the only reference to this site in John’s gospel – it is more frequent a resting spot for Jesus in Matthew, Mark and Luke’s gospel.

If you omit 7:53-8:11 and jump from 7:52 into 8:12 it’s seamless.

In 8:3 you find the only occurrence of the Scribes in John’s gospel, whereas Jesus is with more regularity being confronted by Scribes and Pharisees.

Some scholars believe it lands here in the canon as a bridge between chapters 7 & 8 of John.

If you read chapter 7 you get a sense of Jesus defending himself and in chapter 8 you see Jesus defining himself to an antagonistic world.

N.T. Wright, says of this placement, that it bridges Jesus’ two demeanors in chapters 7 & 8. It forms a kind of explanation for Jesus’ change of mood from “nice-guy” (ch. 7) to “irrationally angry” Jesus (ch. 8). It helps us understand how and why Jesus responds the way he does in chapter 8.

Others affirm placement in the canon here in John’s gospel as a way of providing a narrative illustration regarding the conflict occurring in John 7 & 8.

One of the specific conflicts found in chapter 7 is a proper interpretation of the law and this story’s conflict centers around a specific interpretation of the law.

Others would say that this is a preacher’s technique whereby you take long discourses and intersperse teaching stories along the way to illustrate. In fact, many biblical teachers breath a relief sigh when getting to this story after tackling the heavy nature of chapter 7 and before diving into the weighty waters of chapter 8.

This story forms a bridge between the two chapters in a way that it illustrates what is already transpiring. Namely, it functions as a story about Jesus’ relationship to the law AND Jesus’ relationship to the religious establishment.

While most scholars will agree this text is not germane to John, they also can live with its placement.

One of our Presbyterian forebears, John Calvin considered the placement of John 7:53-8:11 as, *nihil apostolico spiritu indignum continet* (containing nothing unworthy of the apostolic spirit). Thus, regardless of whether it is original to John, we can find ourselves agreeing with Calvin. We are, if you will, like the archaeological dig which comes upon skeletal remains in the ground and doesn't know what caused the remains to be deposited in this place all they know is that something happened here. And with that they unpack their tools and set about learning more.

So, let's learn something, together.

N.T. Wright calls this passage "The woman taken in adultery...The men taken in hypocrisy." He highlights that this begins a sequence of events that begins with this mob picking up rocks to stone this woman and will end with the people picking up stones to kill Jesus in John 8:59. It all begins with scribes and Pharisees bringing a woman into the middle of a circle and making her stand there – alone – they pose a statement and question to Jesus, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. Now in the law Moses commanded to stone such women. Now what do you say?" (9:4-5)

Now, here's the thing, they really don't care.

They don't care about the law. The laws they quote (Leviticus 10 and Deuteronomy 22) require both involved parties to be brought forth. They don't even have an eye-witness to corroborate the accusation. They don't care about the law.

They don't care about this woman.

They don't care about anything except what verse six declares,

"The said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him."

In the words of Admiral Ackbar as the rebel alliance makes their attack run on a fully operational death star, "It's a trap!"

They want Jesus to tell the woman that her sins are forgiven which would equate to Jesus telling people to ignore something in the law of Moses.

They are using this woman as a pawn in their chess game with Jesus.

They sit back enjoying moral superiority over her in hopes of placing Jesus in a corner from which he has no easy egress.

And Jesus does the natural thing – he bends down to the ground and begins writing with his finger in the sand.

Jesus opts for silence – allowing the opposition to hold the stage – perhaps like when a parent lets a toddler run the tantrum until collapse.

It's also a very Mediterranean conversational pattern in Jesus' time – the act of stooping to write on the ground indicated a refusal to engage in the dialogue. (Perhaps we have a recurrence of this technique with our texting culture.)

The scribes & Pharisees recognize this move because they continue to press the question.

Then the answer – Jesus stands – I see this cinematically happening in slow motion with a slight left turn toward the camera – and he responds masterfully.

He doesn't answer their legal question.

Instead, he moves beyond the legality to the encompassing issue of sin.

He doesn't declare the Mosaic law wrong ONLY that if we're going to take it seriously then we should all find ourselves guilty.

"Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." (8.7)

And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground

Now, here, my cinematic mind takes over again, and I wonder when he bends down to write in the sand, is this Jesus way of throwing a bit of shade toward the scribes and Pharisees? Is this like the shrug lunge one takes toward an opponent when they spit better rhymes during a rap battle? Is this Jesus' celebratory *Fortnite* dance? Is it like a first century mic drop? Or, is it Jesus way of drawing attention away from the accused and the accusers by bringing the focus on him?

The result of this response causes a ripple effect throughout the gathered crowd.

The silence is broken as every death gripping fist (pick up stone from lectern...) begins to release its hold on the stone in their hand and you hear stones drop (drop stone from hand...) – one-by-one – to the ground.

One-by-one, the gathered crowd walks away. Beginning with the elders...we are told – perhaps highlighting the fact that even the most senior and revered members of the community are not without sin. With age, perhaps we become less sure of our purity.

Jesus' response is reminiscent of the adage told by grandparents to grandchildren, "Never forget, whenever you point your finger at someone there are three pointing back at you."

It reminds me of the story my Greek Professor, Dr. Nickle, told us in seminary. A man had a dream one night that he had died and gone to heaven. As he walked around he noticed many people from his earthly life also there. He recalled that on earth they had not been overly nice to him and wondered what they were doing in heaven. Sensing his discontent, St. Peter said, "Remember, when you think to yourself, 'Now, how did that person get in here?' there are at least a half-dozen other people wondering the same about you."

Now, I got to tell you, it felt like Dr. Nickle ended that story looking right at me...but I'm going to go with there was a clock on the wall above my head.

However, I'll take it as God's way of helping me to see early on that forgiveness and grace are what God is all about.

One of the grievous things this story about Jesus and the Scribes & Pharisees puts before us is the deep-rooted sin of spiritual arrogance that uses the God-given law to make oneself out to be righteous.

Overlooking the fact that the law is used to shine the light of God's judgement into the dark places of the individual's heart.

Calvin said it this way, "Jesus reproves hypocrites who flatter themselves with their vices and pronounce often excessive and severe punishment."

Jesus is not saying forgiveness is the same as tolerance.

Jesus is not saying sin does not matter.

He is implying though that forgiveness provides us with an after story – how we live after we encounter forgiveness – forgiveness prompts the ellipses of faith – it is the three dots indicating what comes next – what will we do *after* we encounter God’s grace.

The forgiveness Jesus offers takes sin seriously AND pronounces that God is choosing to set sin’s death penalty aside – opening us up to the full possibility of living set before us.

Jesus, in this encounter, reminds us once again, the He is the consummate protector of persons.

Keep in mind, this book of John, is not about us.

This book is about the one who shows God to us.

This book is about the one who reveals to us who we are.

This book, more importantly, is about the one who reveals to us who we can become when wrapped in God’s grace.

Jesus stands, scans the surroundings & recognizes that the absence of her accusers is both eloquent and exuberant.

He asks, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?”

Jesus treats this woman as a human being – with dignity and respect.

There’s no subjective-emotional question, like, “Well, now, young lady. Tell me, why did you do it? What did we earn from this encounter?”

Rather than resort to name-calling...Jesus equips this person for new life by allowing her to see that she is called by a name – and that name is *Child of God*.

He’s giving her a chance to be responsible – in the truest sense of the word *response-able* – she can choose how she responds from this point forward.

She responds, “No one, Sir.”

Her response is our response, and in it, I believe, one can hear, relief...surprise...a bit of remorse...surreptitious guilt...maybe (and I’m banking on this) even a touch of overwhelming joy...

“Neither do I condemn you.,” Jesus says, “Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.”

We’ve seen a response like this before, back in 5.14, Jesus says to the man who was ill for thirty plus years whom he healed on the Sabbath, “Do not sin anymore so that nothing worse happens to you.”

In both 5.14 and 8.11, Jesus doesn’t speak of what is required for acquittal.

Instead, Jesus urges the acquitted to recognize that the acquittal which is freely given can become the beginning point for new life.

Jesus acknowledges sin...the lame man’s, this woman’s, yours and mine.

Jesus also conveys confidence in the sinner's potential to live into the creation God knows he/she can be...again, this woman's, yours and me.

The question is, how will we respond?

Amen and Amen.