

The Woman Caught in Adultery

John 8:2-11 by Patty Friesen (June 7/2015)

When Jesus went to the temple where he had taught
The Pharisees brought a woman they had caught
Declaring, In the Law, Moses said we ought
To stone such women,
Now what do you say, on this your judgment day?
But Jesus bent down and wrote silently on the ground
When they kept questioning him
He replied, If any of you are without sin
Let them be the first
To throw a stone at the cursed.
Again he stopped down and wrote on the ground
At this the Pharisees drifted away, until only Jesus and the woman stayed
Woman, where are they? Who has condemned you today?
No one, sir. Then neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more.

The adulterous woman was the most exciting story we studied in Doc Schroeder's Gospel of John Class at Canadian Mennonite Bible College in the fall of 1984. It was so exciting that I enthusiastically preached a sermon on it at Holyrood Mennonite Church in Edmonton not realizing a cousin in attendance had confessed to adultery in his marriage. It must have been an uncomfortable sermon to sit through but I hope the message of forgiveness was comforting for him as it is for all of us. For none of us are without sin.

Adultery, in Jewish law was concerned with unfaithfulness on the part of the wife, of course, and not with affairs of husbands. The word caught suggests that she was caught in the very act. According to Deuteronomy 19:15, at least two witnesses were needed for this capital offense minus the husband. So it begs the question – how is it that two witnesses end up being in someone's bedroom during a tryst? Nothing is mentioned of the lover. He must have escaped. It is all beginning to smell a little fishy and indeed when she is brought before Jesus, not for trial but for sentencing, the Pharisees pose the question of capital punishment to trap Jesus just as they trapped the woman.

At this time, the Romans had taken away the right of Jewish leaders to execute anyone. The Romans wanted that joy for themselves so the trap is for Jesus to rule in favor of Moses' law and against the Romans that would get him into trouble – just like the trap with the Roman coin and should Jews pay taxes to Romans.

But Jesus simply bent down and began writing on the ground with his finger. What was he writing? There are many suggestions. The most ancient is that he wrote the sins of the accusers. Or in Roman legal practice, the judge first wrote the sentence and then read it aloud. Or others think Jesus is acting out Jeremiah 17:13, Those who turn away from you shall be written on the earth, for they have forsaken the Lord, the fountain of living water. Or it could be simply that Jesus was simply tracing lines on the ground while he was thinking or to contain his feels of disgust for the violent zeal of the accusers.

Jesus stands and says Let the one among you with no sin, cast the first stone – reminding them of Deuteronomy 17:7; that witnesses must cast the first stone and therefore have special responsibility in the death of the accused. Then Jesus wrote again, and scholars believe this time he wrote, Exodus 23:7: “Keep far away from a false matter and slay not the innocent and the just for I shall not acquit the guilty.” The audience went away one by one, starting with the religious leaders who may have been most guilty and Jesus was left alone with the woman still standing there before him. It is an exquisite moment and Jesus stands up again saying, ‘Woman where are they all? Has no one condemned you?’. “No one sir,” she answered. Jesus said, ‘Nor do I condemn you. Go and sin no more’; meaning that indeed she was guilty but forgiven.

This does not mean Jesus is indifferent to sin or that Jesus is saying every judge must be sinless to judge others. He is dealing here with zealots who have taken upon themselves the indignant enforcement of the Law and he has every right to demand that their case be thoroughly lawful and their motives honest. He recognizes that although they are zealous for the word of the Law, they are not interested in the purpose of the Law, for the spiritual state of the woman is not even in question or whether or not she is penitent. Jesus knows she is a pawn to trap him and the husband of the woman may have cynically arranged to have her caught by carefully prearranging that there be witnesses to her sin, instead of seeking to win back her love. The base motives of the judges, the husband and the witnesses are not according to the Law and Jesus has every right to challenge their attempt to secure the woman's conviction.

But this story isn't about the self-righteousness of religious leaders either. This is a story about Jesus, his control of an out of control situation. Jesus treats the woman and the Pharisees as theological equals, each as human beings to whom words about sin can be addressed. Jesus offers all of them the opportunity to break with old ways, where the power of condemnation and death determine everyone's lives and to enter a new world of mercy and freedom. Jesus challenges embedded religious authority with his authority to forgive and that's why we need him so much.

An Ode to a Woman Caught in Adultery

You were a pawn in this deceitful con. You were not a puritan and that was an irritant.
You wore the letter A but you had no say.
They said you were to blame and had no shame so you were conveniently in the frame
To trap Jesus in his claim – that in matters of life and death, only he reigns.

Noah will play Amazing Grace for us and then we will sing it together...