

## **Postures: Judgement**

### **John 8:1-11**

Good Morning Church Family,

I wish that I could be there with you all in person, but since I'm recovering from Covid, it seemed wise to stay home this week. Thank you all so much for your prayers and checking in on us this week, we truly appreciate it. For this morning, we're continuing our series of stories from the gospels where people have an encounter with Jesus.

In this morning's text, Jesus came into the temple and began to teach the people who were there. This was a common thing for Jesus to do, and something that would have been normal for "visiting Jewish rabbis." While he's teaching the people there, a group of Jewish Scribe, Jewish Scholars, and a group of Pharisees, Jewish Religious leaders, haul a woman into the space where Jesus is teaching. It creates quite a scene- a woman hauled into the temple, the leaders probably shouting, the crowds turning, straining to see what's happening. They bring her right to the front and stand her in front of Jesus.

"Teacher," they shout, "This woman was caught in the very act of adultery. The law of Moses says that she should be stoned. What do you say?" In just a few short

sentences, the trap has been laid for Jesus. He's a rabbi, a good, god honouring Jew. The religious leaders know that any Rabbi worth his salt will follow the law as it is written. This will surely put an end to Jesus teaching their people in this temple. No decent Rabbi would consider himself above the law, above Moses, the great patriarch of the nation of Israel. And as for this woman, whatever her name is, she's a pawn, a means to end the trapping of Jesus. If she didn't want to end up here then she shouldn't have been involved in an adulterous relationship! She brought this on herself. Poor choices have consequences. So, Jesus, what's it going to be? Try to worm your way out of this one.

And what does Jesus do? He stoops down and begins drawing? Scribbling? Writing in the sand. It's such an odd thing. Such an odd detail to include. One of the most helpful things I learned in my preaching course that I took in November is remember that every detail in a text in the Bible is there on purpose. When you think how much TIME and EFFORT was required to write something down during biblical times, the author isn't going to just add in something for the fun of it, "Oh this is an interesting tidbit, I'll just add this in.", no, everything that's in scripture is there on purpose. So, why? Why does Jesus do this?

There are lots of theories about this, some suggest that Jesus was collecting his thoughts, slowing down the instant demand that the group was making. Others suggest that Jesus wrote down the sins of these men, so they could be reminded plainly. Both are compelling suggestions. The cultural context of Jewish culture and law suggests

that Jesus stooped and wrote in the sand for two reasons: The first being that when accused people were brought for “court”, so to speak, the rabbi was to write their names and accusation down, usually the closest place to write was the sand on the ground. In doing this, Jesus is making a point to this group of accusers that they too have broken the law. Where is the man? It takes two to tango, but there is only one here...why? Because it was convenient? Because she was unprotected by status or power as the man would have been? The man could walk away, but she couldn't.

Yet, the scribes and pharisees are undeterred by Jesus. They continue asking, pressing him to say yes or no to the law of Moses. Yes or no to the woman's stoning, they're not looking for nuance, they're looking for incrimination. Finally, Jesus stands, turns to the group, and says, ““Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” And he stoops back down, writing. One cultural commentary on this passage says this, “Perhaps, Jesus was bringing to light another minute detail of Jewish law, recognizable to the religious rulers: self-incrimination was unacceptable testimony. Two or more witnesses were required to testify against any accused person. Furthermore, “a wrongdoer is incompetent as a witness, being presumed to be unjust and untruthful,” Encyclopedia Judaica stated.” Jesus would have needed to write down the names of the accusers. A wrong doer was incompetent as a witness. Jesus is saying to the Pharisees, if you want to accuse this woman, then you show me how that's possible. Show me that you are innocent.

Frankly, Jesus could have said this plainly to them. He knew the Jewish law, and he

could have debated the minutiae of the law as well as any of them. He could have chosen an argument, a right and wrong conversation, but he didn't. He chose to ask a question of self-reflection; asking these men, these accusers, to examine first their own hearts.

Many people, myself included, really love this story. Jesus sticks it to Pharisees and the religious establishment, the bad guys who think they are the good guys walk away, humbled. And the woman, whose very life was on the line, is forgiven. It's a feel good story in the gospels.

Yet, we also know that we as people, in our very human nature, love being right. Love the rush of knowing we have the right answer, and sticking it to someone. Being right, or even righteous, can take precedent over people, over relationships. In the world of social media, we see this all the time. When a newsworthy event happens, people are so QUICK to offer their thoughts, their "hot take", their quick response meant to attract attention, maybe even be a little inflammatory. A big value is placed in our culture on taking a stand, speaking out, and maybe, in some way, ensuring that others know our position-that we're right, or on the right side of history. This quick, public response is often called virtue signalling, "the action or practice of publicly expressing opinions or sentiments intended to demonstrate one's good character or the moral correctness of one's position on a particular issue."it's noticeable how often virtue signalling consists of saying you hate things". In our story this morning, this is precisely what the Pharisees

were up to. They were going to catch Jesus and punish this adulterous woman in one fell swoop, and come off looking so right, so righteous.

Jesus himself could have done the same, thrown the law back in their faces, given them a thorough dressing down, but instead, Jesus prioritised real people, both the woman and religious leaders, over being right. I'll say that again, Jesus prioritised real people over being right. When the leaders attempted to entrap Jesus, unjustly sacrifice this woman on the altar of righteousness, Jesus invited them to examine their own hearts in order to open their hearts up to this woman. Because by examining our own lives, hearts and motivations, our own need for the righteousness of Jesus, we see one another in a new light. Jesus invites the religious leaders into that, he invites the woman into the story into that, and he invites us into that.

How can we let go of judgement and drop our stones? How do we prioritise people over being right?

When Junia was a baby, we lived in southern Manitoba, and I'd visit the public health nurse every couple of months for Junia's immunizations. It was a small public health office, so I'd always see the same nurse. One visit, we got on the topic of mom shaming - the way in which mothers are often shamed by people or society for the choices they make, usually it's over things like what kids eat, daycare, that sort of thing. The nurse told me, "Early on in my career, I worked up North, and I really learned a lot about not judging people's choices, and trying to be more compassionate and curious rather than

judging or shaming. One day, a mother came in with her baby and the baby's bottle was filled with orange soda. And so I just asked her, honestly, curiously, "Why do you give your baby orange soda?" and I'll never forget the mother's response, "Because it tastes good and it will make my baby fat." Of course, what good mother wouldn't want her baby to have something that tasted good, that they liked. And what mother wouldn't want her baby to chub up, in that perfect, roly-poly way. That conversation really taught me to reserve judgement, because you can't know what someone's intentions or reasons are just by looking."

If we hold this lesson up to our text for this morning, Jesus takes it a step further, you don't need to know the specifics of someone else's story to have compassion and grace for them, because you already know your own story. We already know our own story. We are intimately acquainted with the human condition. Jesus shows the religious leaders and us that the cure for a judgemental, holier than thou posture is to turn our gaze to the mirror, to our own selves. Our own failures, shortcomings and sins.

It's in this moment, friends, that the Good News that is the gospel of Jesus Christ enters the story. Jesus asks that "Whoever here is without sin, may throw the first stone." And one by one, each person, from the oldest to the youngest drops their stones, turns and walks away. I imagine the woman, crouched there, waiting for a stone to make contact with her body and all she hears in the soft thud of stones hitting the sand around her. Finally, when the last accuser walks away, keenly aware of his own humanity, Jesus speaks directly to the woman. "Jesus straightened up and said to her, "Woman, where

are they? Has no one condemned you?” She said, “No one, sir.” And Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.”

Jesus does not condemn the woman. Not did he condemn the religious leaders. Nor does he condemn us! No matter where our stance, our posture, our story- we are offered, covered with the righteousness of Jesus. We don't have to feel sufficiently guilty for God's grace to be sufficient. Romans 8: 1-5 reminds us, “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. “ We don't have to be righteous, or even be right to be forgiven and freed by the Gospel and Saving Work of Jesus Christ.

So, as we wrap up, let's walk out this idea a bit more of practising a love of real people over a love of being right. Knowing that Jesus condemns no one, ourselves included, how can we live into and out of that grace?

First, we can choose to slow down our responses and choose to listen. Jeanette Hanson, whom I think most of you know, once commented that there's a lot of pressure

on faith organisations to “make statements” for (or more often against) things that are going on in the world. She said that those sorts of statements certainly have their place, but then she said, what about listening? What about praying? Do we always have to be talking? These are good questions for us to ponder as people of faith.

Secondly, before we judge others, we can look in the mirror and do some self-reflection, just as Jesus asked the crowd at the temple to do. Once we get curious about our own motivations, and are able to be honest with ourselves, we can extend that same non-judgemental curiosity to others. When I attended the ReNew conference online in February, I attended a workshop on conflict resolution that was led by a conflict mediator. It was really good. One of the most helpful things she said, I think, was the “iceberg” theory. Usually, in high pressure situations, like the one at the temple in our story, people will state their position “this woman is adulterous and should be stoned!” but their why, their reason for saying it, their feelings are sitting beneath the surface, remain unaddressed, “Jesus, you are up ending the religious establishment, which makes me feel insecure and uninfluential and I’m going to use this woman as the scapegoat to fix that.”

This mediator encouraged people, and churches, to try to dig deep early on, to verbalize why. I’ve started trying to do this in my conflicts with Taylor. One evening, we’d dropped the kids off for a sleepover at their cousins, and I suggested we go out for coffee. Taylor was really hesitant. I was feeling miffed, I wanted to fight about it. But rather than say, “What’s your deal? We never get a night off and you just want to go home!” I said, “I feel



like you don't want to spend time with me or that spending one on one time isn't important to you." It felt awkward and vulnerable, but that stance freed Taylor up to say his own why, and it became much easier to work it out because we knew not just the what, but the why. I realise I'm veering off the path of theology into psychology here, but I think this is really practical way that we can walk Jesus' call to examine our own hearts before passing judgement

In Closing, dear ones, Jesus calls us to prioritise real people over being right. The Son of God condemns no one, but insteads frees us all. Jesus calls us to examine our own hearts and learn into the compassion grace that Christ affords to all.

Amen.