

Tell Me Something Good

The Good News Is . . .

. . . rooted in justice, mercy, and faithfulness

Southminster Presbyterian Church

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Epilogue by T. Denise Anderson

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Texts: John 8:2 - 11, Matthew 23:23

Opening Prayer

Holy One,

when you speak, we don't want to miss it.

When you bend down and write in the dirt,

when you move through the trees,

when you wake with the dawn,

when you tug on our heart,

or whisper into our dreams,

we don't want to miss it.

So today we pray, clear out the cobwebs in our ears.

Quiet the steady stream of thoughts marching through our minds.

Open up space in our hearts so that we can receive your word for us today.

With hope we pray. Amen.

Sermon

The story read for us today is really challenging. It seemed so simple when I was a child. She did something bad. Religious teachers wanted her stoned according to the law. Jesus paused and wrote something that caused them to simply walk away. Jesus told the woman to go and sin no more. A life was saved and transformed.

But now when I read it, I have so many more questions. Before we get there, it's worth noting that textual critics . . . those who analyze the biblical texts for changes in tone, vocabulary, style, and more, largely believe this story was added into the book of John as much around 400 CE. It's not original to the text. Scholar and professor of Christian Ethics, David P. Gushee, notes that the church has simply loved this story too much to keep it out of our collective memory of Jesus. But let's think about what we know and don't know about this story.

This woman is brought before Jesus. She's been caught in the act of adultery..who knows how she is dressed as she is thrust forward toward Jesus.

Who was this woman? Was she young? Old? Clearly she was not alone in her crime . . . why was her partner . . . who in this story would most likely be assumed to be male . . . or the other person likely would have been brought before Jesus also . . . why was he not brought before Jesus as also guilty? Is he being protected from being identified and she is being villainized as the temptress, so it was all her fault? Was she married? Was he? Was this act she was caught in even an act of consent or was she being raped or coerced but still found at fault? Was she somehow even set up for this so they could have someone to bring to Jesus in hopes of trapping him in his own teachings? Was she widowed or abandoned by a husband? The word for

adultery indicates she was married, but one is still married even if abandoned. Was she impoverished and had turned to the oldest of professions in a soul crushing attempt to be able to eat or maybe even feed children? Or was it indeed an act of passion in which case women are the ones burdened with holding boundaries lest they be called easy?

Suddenly our reading of it is way more complicated.

And then comes the trap. They ask Jesus what should be done, leading with the information that the law of Moses requires that she be stoned. Ah, these Pharisees. Their hearts are just so dark. This was a setup if ever there was one. Jesus is in the middle of teaching the crowds who have come to hear him. Now they ask him his judgment in front of all these eager learners.

It's important to note that Jewish law as a whole is not black and white or petty. The Jewish community has a strong tradition of reflection and questioning the law. They can be incredibly nuanced and are good at questioning and doing deep work to understand God's demands upon God's people. The pharisees in particular were more rigid . . . especially, perhaps, when they wanted to prove a point against Jesus.

Here's the thing. The law of Moses did indeed require that one guilty of adultery be stoned. But remember how Jesus' ministry is lived out under the oppressive rule of the Romans? And the Romans have declared that the Jewish rulers do not have the authority to prescribe capital punishment. That could only be declared by the Romans. If he says to stone her, he can be brought up on charges by the Roman authorities.

So if Jesus declines to say that she must be stoned, he is not acting in compliance with Mosaic law and his authority as a rabbi could be undermined because he is not upholding the law.

But if he says she should be stoned, he's in trouble with the civil authorities. He has been purposely trapped by the two systems of law under which they live.

I imagine Jesus just sighing. He sees the trap. But puh-lease. He is not so easily entangled.

So he bends down and starts writing something in the dirt. We don't know what. Many things have been surmised. The Pharisees prided themselves on their purity. Did he bend down and write names of women about whom they had harbored impure thoughts or more? Petty or not so petty infractions that did not keep either the spirit or the letter of the law?

The story tells us that the Pharisees left . . . the older ones leaving before the younger ones. Did the older ones have more to lose? Or did they come to the realization of their imperfection sooner than the younger ones? Or did Jesus write words referring to different Mosaic laws they had broken over the years. Whatever it was that he wrote, when he stood and told those who were without sin to leave, that's all it took. Those words and, for the younger religious professionals, some more writing in the dirt. And then they were gone.

The Pharisees were gone, but the crowds there to learn from Jesus aren't mentioned. Did they stay and witness all of this, jaws increasingly falling open as they watched those who claimed to perfectly fulfill the law silenced . . . by silence.

Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?

No one, Sir.

Neither do I condemn you. Go your way and from now on do not sin again.

The only one who had the right to condemn her. The only one who was perfect. He didn't require perfection or even penance from her. He granted mercy.

He doled out justice to those who dared to proclaim themselves righteous. He granted her mercy right there in front of all the people who just heard her publicly maligned. And he called her to a life of faithfulness going forward.

It can be simpler to follow a law to the letter than to explore it. Maybe it's like taking an originalist stance for interpreting the constitution instead of seeing it as a living document.

But what do we do about this mercy thing? It's so hard. It's complicated. It stretches us. If mercy were simple, Jesus would not have spent so much time teaching about it. Calling people to forgive others 70 times 7 times.

Some of you are familiar with Bryan Stevenson, author of the book *Just Mercy*. Perhaps his most famous quote is, "Each of us is more than the worst thing we've ever done." And isn't that good news! Not just for the woman in the story, but for each of us. But the phrase before this quote is instructive. He says, "Proximity has taught me some basic and humbling truths, including this vital lesson: Each of us is more than the worst thing we've ever done."

I think there's great wisdom and incredible power in proximity. Not proximity in order to catch someone in an immoral act. But proximity with the poor and oppressed in order to understand better and to care.

John Wesley was the founder of a strain of theology thereby named Wesleyanism, which forms the foundation of the

theology for the Methodist denomination. John Wesley was very concerned with the holiness of his flock and set forth high expectations for those who wanted to follow Jesus. This was in the 1740s. Some you might expect: Gathering for worship. Reading the bible. Taking communion. Giving alms or money. Avoiding sin.

But more interesting to me was the requirement that followers spend time weekly among the poor. They were assigned visits to those who were struggling deeply with poverty. And as they did so, their hearts were very naturally warmed toward those whom they were visiting. They saw children without shoes during the cold of winter and were moved to find ways to buy a pair to bring at a following visit. They saw houses without enough wood to keep homes warm and arrived at their next visit with wood. Not out of pity. Not with a savior complex. Judgment fell away and it was replaced by compassion. By understanding. By mercy. Growing friendship led to a commitment to justice for those who worked so hard and had so little.

Because being among the poor and the oppressed isn't *only* about helping others. It also transforms *us*. When people who are numbers and statistics and news bites start to become friends, our harsh judgments melt into solidarity. Some of our assumptions are challenged when we see their reality.

No one who joined on the journeys of Freedom Rides in the 60s could come back the same. No one who served in the Peace Corps forgets what they have seen and heard and done. Anyone who thinks spending time with the poor is about saving the poor holds such a limited view and has probably never done it. Anyone who allows themselves and is privileged by those who struggle to truly enter into friendships one with another, will

find themselves forever changed and saved from a lifetime of self-righteous condemning of others.

Screens and news stories allow us a distance that is antiseptic and does us the disservice of separating us and delivering a narrative written by someone else. Usually written by those with relative power. And it rarely chooses a lens of justice, mercy, and faithfulness.

I don't think the woman in this story wanted to be seen. But I'm pretty sure everyone who was present that day left changed. I have no idea if she went and sinned no more. But the crowds learned that there's more to a story than meets the eye and mercy is powerful. And I'll bet the woman who was brought in shame and left cushioned in mercy cried herself to sleep that night feeling, for the first time in a very long time, seen.

May we have the grace to see and be seen also.

Amen.