

The Lady is Not for Stoning¹

This scene in the Temple district with the adulterous woman is much more tense and consequential than at first it might appear. For starters, we read in the previous chapter that the religious officials had dispatched their security people days before to arrest Jesus. And they couldn't pull it off. The holiday mob that had flooded into Jerusalem was fascinated by Jesus and flocked to him. Any action by the religion leaders might have sparked a riot. It helps also to recall that several years before, King Herod had constructed an imposing fort—Fort Antonia—next door to the Temple. The fort's towers enabled the Roman military to peer into the Temple district in order to insure that any mob of pilgrims didn't get out of hand. So there is an armed military presence in the background.

Enter now the woman caught in adultery. The Bible says that the scribes and Pharisees were using her as a prop to force Jesus into a gaffe that would humiliate him in the eyes of the crowd and make it easier to arrest and eliminate him. So, if Jesus said, "let's stone her," he would have aroused the compassion we feel toward her even today. The crowd may well have objected violently to any harm coming to this poor girl. Then if they rioted everyone could expect Roman intervention.

¹Douglas DeCelle preached this sermon on August 2, 2009 at the First Presbyterian Church in LaGrange, GA.

Such a development would have earned Jesus the reputation of being a rabble rouser.

On the other hand, if Jesus says "let's not punish her," then he goes directly against the Bible's instructions. Some would surely say that Jesus was soft on his support of the Law of Moses. Others might say that Jesus lacked the nerve to do the hard thing. So, the compassionate course causes Jesus to lose credibility with some. I'm imagining that the religion leaders who dragged the woman before Jesus had figured out all of this out ahead of time and relished seeing Jesus entangled in their net.

Let the tenseness of this scene soak into your imagination for a second. I saw recently in a movie whose name I can't remember a depiction of the Taliban in Afghanistan stoning a woman—clad from head to foot in a burka. The stoning took place on a soccer field as a kind of gruesome infuriating half-time display. Take the feelings you might have in reaction to men dragging a woman to her execution and add them to this already volatile scene with Jesus, the crowd, the Roman soldiers—all in the shadow of the Temple. This is tense!

There's more. The more you think about the background to this situation the more the whole thing begins to stink. How is it that, if this woman has been caught in the act of adultery,

the man she was with is not being dragged in front of Jesus also?

Here's another thought. What exactly has been going on in the last 24 hours before we see this woman? How is it that this woman's trial just happens to coincide with Jesus' teaching in the Temple districts? Did officials just happen to burst into the bedroom with the legally required two witnesses in exactly the right moment when Jesus was available to be consulted publically about her punishment? Or, more plausibly, has the crime of the woman been jiggered and contrived and manipulated for the real purpose of putting Jesus on the spot? If so, what kinds of people do this sort of thing? What kind of believers and leaders are these First Century Jewish Taliban who are okay with grabbing this girl—someone's daughter, someone's sister, someone's mother—and sacrificing her because they didn't have the courage simply to grab Jesus directly the day before in front of the crowd? The woman is a prop. Now she stands in front of Jesus. Everybody stands in front of Jesus.

Jesus' open air classroom changes into a courtroom. Like any esteemed judge, Jesus is seated. And he is called upon to render a judgment. Curiously, Jesus does what is requested. According to the custom of the day, the judge reaches his verdict, writes it down, and then pronounces it verbally for all

to hear. Interestingly enough, Jesus does all of this. He stoops down and writes in the dust. What does he write? We'll never know. By best guess is this. Jesus writes down his judgment of the case. He wrote "guilty." He writes "stone her." Or something like that. Then Jesus stands up to verbally announce his judgment and sentence. He even designates the manner of execution—stoning. I assume we all know what is entailed in stoning. The accused stands and the entire community picks up stones and pelts him or her until the injuries cause death to the victim.

Now, it is at this point that the whole scene is transformed from disgrace to grace. Let's go back to the situation. Jesus has pronounced the sentence and the punishment. He has acted according to the Law of Moses. But ingeniously, Jesus also specifies how the execution should be carried out. The person who is willing to claim to be sinless will throw the first rock.

Stoning allows individuals to blend in with a mob and participate in executing a person anonymously. No single individual is the cause of the death. Jesus changes this. He calls for one righteous person to get the process started—the one who will step forward and declare himself without sin. Of course, no one budges. It is on this most slender thread of

honesty and self-awareness that the entire situation is transformed. Not a single person—not even the most venerable elder, or hot shot young scribe—is able to lead the mob in executing the woman.

Now, Jesus stoops down a second time and writes again in the dust. Jesus doesn't stare at the crowd or the accusers. What does he write this time? Well, if we were correct before, maybe Jesus rendered judgments on the various crimes represented in the crowd. Imagine Jesus writing idolater, hypocrite, thief, murderer, adulterer, liar, false witness. Miraculously, a tense, sorry situation begins to resolve as one by one the accusers walk away.

What has just happened? Jesus has brilliantly, miraculously overcome the powers of sin and death. Everyone breathes freely. The poor woman walks home shaken but free. The religion leaders themselves have also been let off their own hook. They are prevented from harming both the woman and Jesus. And Jesus has averted—at least temporarily—his own arrest. We're seeing grace enacted before our eyes. An intractable situation is resolved.

How often do we read this story thinking we're going to learn something about what our faith says about adultery, women's rights, or capital punishment? What comes through so

powerfully today is none of this. What comes through is Jesus—his brilliance, his compassion, his haunting ability to rescue and set free. He has literally saved a condemned woman's life. And this is before he goes to the cross which is the ultimate event that brings life and freedom.

Isn't this incident of deliverance a foretaste of what you and I most profoundly need? Today we glimpse at Jesus' care and wisdom and his power. And we have new cause to hope. Because if we see forgiveness and life coming from Jesus in an incident in his life, how much more will you and I experience these at the end of all things. One day you and I will stand before Jesus our judge. The record of our own lives will be in plain view. Our entire hope will be in his judgment and his love. Whatever has been disgraceful, shabby, and death dealing in our own lives will be before him to make right. Today's word has given us good hope that we too, like that poor woman and even the religion leaders, will be released and set free to start afresh. Let this word be the good news for this day.