

Bible Study Appendix

Sinners Encounter Jesus John 7:53–8:11 by The Reverend Frances Taylor Gench

The church has long been ill at ease with matters of sexual impropriety—from its earliest history! The text before us is a case in point. Scholars generally agree that the story of “the woman caught in adultery” was not originally part of the Gospel of John (for this reason, you may find it enclosed in double-brackets in your Bible or omitted altogether). It does not appear in the earliest Greek manuscripts of John; is more characteristic of Luke than John in vocabulary, style, and theology; and interrupts the narrative in progress (you can skip from 7:52 to 8:12 without missing a beat). In later Greek manuscripts, the story appears in various locations (after John 7:36, 52, and 21:25; even Luke 21:38). Thus, it is a truly homeless story! However, scholars also believe it is a truly ancient one based on the earliest oral traditions about Jesus—a story that has all the earmarks of an authentic incident from his life. Why, then, did it become a free-floating story without a secure canonical home? In all likelihood, because it was suppressed! The ease with which Jesus extended mercy to an adulterous woman embarrassed the earliest Christian communities and undermined their own, more severe, penitential practices.¹ Moreover, many interpreters (ancient and modern) have feared that Christian women would find encouragement in the story to live unchaste lives—to “sin with impunity.”²

Nevertheless, the power of the story is such that it has been cherished and preserved through the centuries and is worthy of our close attention. Indeed, New Testament scholar Raymond Brown observes that no apology is needed for its presence in John: “the delicate balance between the justice of Jesus in not condoning the sin and his mercy in forgiving the sinner is one of the great gospel lessons.”³

The unnamed woman, however, is not the only sinner who encounters Jesus or who hears a promise of new life in this story. Indeed, the fact that the story is traditionally referred to as “the woman caught in adultery” tends to focus our attention solely on the woman and issues of sexual sin—and obscures the significant role that others, too, play in this scene. Religious persons and groups who would judge and condemn the one guilty of sexual sin are also addressed by Jesus—in strikingly parallel fashion⁴—and they, too, find their lives redirected and transformed by the Word made flesh. Look closely then at both dimensions of this story.

Dramatic reading

Begin with a dramatic reading of John 7:53–8:11. Assign roles for a narrator, Jesus, and the woman, and have the rest of the group read collectively the lines of the scribes and Pharisees. It is a story that needs to be seen as well as heard, so have the group stand in a circle, with Jesus and the woman in the center, so that Jesus’ nonverbal as well as verbal responses can be observed.

Questions for discussion and reflection

- What most captures your attention as you encounter this story? What questions does it raise for you?
- How would you interpret Jesus' enigmatic gesture of writing on the ground? What do you think he is writing?

Speculation abounds: Is he doodling to contain his anger? Writing the sins of the accusers? Writing words of Scripture (the Ten Commandments; Jer. 17:13; or Ex. 23:1b, 7 have all been suggested)? Providing an action that speaks louder than words, a visible sign of disengagement?

- Consider Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams' suggestion and share your responses to it:

When the accusation is made, Jesus at first makes no reply but writes with his finger on the ground. What on earth is he doing? Commentators have had plenty of suggestions, but there is one meaning that seems to me obvious . . . He hesitates. He does not draw a line, fix an interpretation, tell the woman who she is and what her fate should be. He allows a moment, a longish moment, in which people are given time to see themselves differently precisely because he refuses to make the sense they want. When he lifts his head, there is both judgment and release.⁵

- Jesus' stunning counter-challenge in verse 7 quite literally disarms a mob. What strikes you most about it?

Two points may be worth noting in the discussion. In the first place, Jesus' response indicates that he refuses to rank-order sins. He is not overly fascinated with sexual sin, nor does he seem to regard it as greater than other sins in the sight of God. In the second place, it is addressed to individuals rather than to an undifferentiated crowd, and directs their gaze inward, where they may discern from their own personal histories whether they are truly in a position to condemn. To their credit, none accepts the invitation to cast the first stone. Note: none exempts himself from self-judgment.⁶ We often overlook this, imagining they slink off with their tails between their legs, but the text does not say this. They do not accept the invitation, and though they had arrived on the scene as an undifferentiated mob, they depart as individuals ("one by one," v. 9)—individuals who have been disarmed and redirected by the self-knowledge that emerges in an encounter with the Word.

- The crowd disperses "one by one, *beginning with the elders*" (v. 9). Why, do you think? What do you make of this fascinating detail?

- As commentator Gail O'Day observes, Jesus treats both the religious authorities and the woman as “theological equals, each as human beings to whom words about sin can be addressed.”⁷ Moreover, “Both the scribes and Pharisees and the woman are invited to give up old ways and enter a new way of life.”⁸ Can you think of a new title that captures both dimensions of this story?
- Church historian Roberta Bondi observes that judgmentalism is one of the fundamental struggles of the Christian life. It destroys community, it destroys those who do the judging, and it often destroys the one who is judged:

On a small scale judgmentalism destroys marriages, families, and churches. On a wider scale it provides the major fuel of racism, sexism, neglect of the poor, and national self-righteousness. *Judgmentalism for this reason as a breach of love is as serious as any other sin we might commit against one another.*⁹

Bondi, informed by the teachings of the early monastic writers, also observes:

*Cultivating the virtue of seeing ourselves as sinners is a major source of healing the wounds of judgmentalism in our hearts. . . . knowing that I am a sinner means taking seriously the knowledge that we all do or at least are capable of terrible things. The monastic teachers were quite certain that it is not possible to love other people unless we understand at a very deep level that our human failings in the area of love put us all in the same boat.*¹⁰

What do you think of these observations? Do you agree with them? Why or why not?

- Why do you think sexual behavior is commonly judged more harshly than any other in both church and society? Should it be?
- This text comes up frequently in our church debates over sexuality. Have you heard it referenced? If so, how? Why do you think it comes up so frequently?
- What insights does this text offer? What does it contribute to our reflection as we think about the conflict in which our church finds itself engaged?
- What new insights have emerged from your discussion of this story?

¹This point has been persuasively argued by Gail O'Day, “John 7:53–8:11: A Study in Misreading,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* (1992): 631–40; see also Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John (I–XII)*, The Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), p. 335.

² St. Augustine (ca. 430) noted: “Certain persons of little faith, or rather enemies of the true faith, fearing, I suppose, lest their wives should be given impunity in sinning, removed from their manuscripts the Lord’s act of forgiveness toward the adulteress, as if He who had said ‘sin no more’ had granted permission to sin” (“Adulterous Marriages,” [2.7], trans. Charles T. Huegelmeier, in Augustine’s *Treatises on Marriage*

and Other Subjects, trans. Charles T. Wilcox [and others]; ed. Roy J. Deferrari [New York: Fathers of the Church, 1955], p. 107).

³ Brown, pp. 336–37.

⁴ O’Day calls attention to how closely the two scenes in vv. 6b–7 and vv. 8–11 are paralleled: in each, Jesus bends down and writes on the ground (v. 6b, v. 8); Jesus stands up to address his conversation partners (v. 7b, v. 10a); and Jesus speaks (v. 7c, v. 11b) (“A Study in Misreading,” p. 633).

⁵ Rowan Williams, *Writing in the Dust: After September 11* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), p. 78.

⁶ Patricia Klindienst Joplin, “Intolerable Language: Jesus and the Woman Taken in Adultery,” *Shadow of Spirit: Postmodernism and Religion*, Philippa Berry and Andrew Wernick, eds. (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 233.

⁷ O’Day, “The Gospel of John,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, Volume IX (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), p. 630.

⁸ O’Day, “A Study in Misreading,” p. 630.

⁹ Roberta C. Bondi, *To Pray and to Love: Conversations on Prayer with the Early Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), p. 109. Italics mine.

¹⁰ Bondi, p. 112. Italics mine.

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