



Broad Street Presbyterian Church

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“Caught in the Act”

John 8:2-11

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A few weeks ago we sang this hymn that mentioned sin like eight times in one verse. It was horrible. I thought, “Who picked this hymn?” I did, but that’s not the point. It felt oppressive to sing about sin that much. But maybe every so often it’s good to focus on sin. Today we are going to talk about sin. About making mistakes. About messing up.

The woman in today’s story is caught in the act of adultery. Caught in the act. That’s what happened to the woman. Imagine your worst day – imagine the worst thing that you have ever done – the thing that you are the most ashamed of – imagine that being public?

Maybe you don’t have to imagine it.

“I need to see you. It’s important,” he told me. He was a long-term member of the church I was serving at the time, an attorney who was still practicing well past age 65. He was funny, opinionated, self-deprecating, smart. He was a natural leader and widely respected in the congregation. He had been nominated to serve on the session but not yet elected. I was so excited at the prospect of having him on the session.

When he arrived at my office, the story spilled out. He’d gone to a college basketball game, had a few beers, went to drive home and turned the wrong way into a one-way alley. He was stopped by the police and failed the breathalyzer test. He was convicted of a DUI. He told me “I’ve spent my whole life building my reputation and now it’s gone. I’m so embarrassed. It will be in the paper – in the summary of convictions that’s in the paper every Tuesday.” I said, “That section in the really tiny print? I never read that. Who reads that?” “My colleagues read it,” he said.

His shame was palpable. “I can’t serve on the session,” he said. “I’m not worthy.”

That day in Jerusalem everyone wonders what Jesus will do – how he will treat the woman. The Pharisees say to him, “This woman was caught in the act of adultery. The law of Moses commands us to stone her. What do you say?” At that point Jesus notices that all of the Pharisees have a stone or two in their hands, in anticipation of what it is to come.

The text tells us that the Pharisees are testing Jesus. To see if he comes down on the side of compassion or judgment. Jesus doesn’t say anything in response to their question for quite a while. Instead, he does something a little strange, unpredictable. He squats down, all the way down, until his hand can easily touch the ground and then he starts scribbling with his finger in the dust.

We are not told what Jesus writes, and that has driven biblical scholars nuts. But it hasn’t stopped them from speculating. Some have guessed that Jesus writes the Ten Commandments. Others have suggested he writes out the private sins of the Pharisees. I think John Calvin has the best idea on this. He claims Jesus is just

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doodling.¹ Perhaps he is bored. Perhaps he is buying time. Maybe Jesus is trying to figure out what to say. The truth is that he comes up with a great line – one of his best.

“Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.”

I’ve always been rather fond of how I first heard this verse: “Ye without sin cast the first stone.”

After he says these words, Jesus squats down again and fingers the dust. And then there is silence. Lots of silence. Jesus doesn’t elaborate on his words. No one says anything in response. No one has a comeback. Really, what would be there to say that doesn’t make a person sound defensive or judgmental? The Pharisees think they are testing Jesus but now it is he who is testing them.

I like to think that Jesus’ words connect with all who hear them. That his words send each listener off on a personal journey of getting in touch with their own sin. I know that’s what I did this past week as I wrestled with this text. I thought about all of the times I... I remembered the time when... And then there was that day... Oh, I have no intention of sharing with you an inventory of my sin. Nor will I ask you to share yours. But, we all have one. None of us are without sin. None without mistakes. None without regret. None without embarrassment. None without shame.

One by one the men who surround the woman walk away. They take their stone and walk away. They carry the weight of their sin into their lives. Aware of their mistakes and brokenness. Reminded of their need for forgiveness.

Jesus and the woman are left alone. I wonder if that was his strategy all along. Because he sees the woman not as a pawn in a power play – not part of a strategy – but a person struggling with what she has done.

Jesus doesn’t minimize her transgression. He doesn’t let her off the hook. Instead, he asks, “Where are they? Has no one condemned you?” She whispers, “No one.” He then tells her, “Neither do I condemn you.” Can you imagine how those words would have sounded to someone who has been caught in the act, exposed, ashamed; who thinks the day will end in her death? Can you imagine the shock, the relief, the joy?

I’ve been thinking a lot about who we are in this passage. I’m sure we are – on occasion – the crowd – willing to join in crowing over the downfall of another. But, I think we are most like the woman. That the person you are the hardest on is you. The one we are the most likely to stone is our self.

Back to the lawyer in my office.

I did my best that day to listen and listen carefully. Then it was my turn to speak. I said: “We all make mistakes. We all mess up. We all have all done things that we wish we hadn’t done and we hope and pray that people don’t find out or it doesn’t get in the paper or get posted on social media.” I kept talking because I had wanted him to serve on the session before this; now I really wanted him to serve. I told him that the very fact that he was in my office telling me all of this made him even more qualified to be a leader in the church. That the church isn’t looking for perfect – it’s looking for thoughtful and compassionate and self-aware and wise.

We talked a lot that day about mistakes and brokenness and I convinced him to serve on the session.

But mostly we talked about God. The God who offers us forgiveness.

¹ <http://biblehub.com/commentaries/calvin/john/8.htm>

That's what Jesus does that day in Jerusalem. He doesn't use that word, but that's what he's doing.

I wonder what happens to everyone that we meet in today's story. The last thing Jesus says to the woman is "sin no more," as if that is possible. None of us can pull that off but maybe that isn't what Jesus is getting at with his words. Maybe he is telling her that she has a clean slate, a new beginning, a chance to make new mistakes, to mess up a little less, knowing that God doesn't condemn but rather loves us back to life, back to meaning, back to community. I imagine that this woman becomes known as someone who is wise – someone others come to when they don't like the person they have become – when they need to hear a word of forgiveness, when they need a message of hope. Maybe she is nominated to be an elder or a deacon.

What about the Pharisees that are there that day? Within a few hours or a few days, the spell of Jesus' words wear off and most of them go back to their old ways of judging other more harshly than themselves. But I'm betting that at least a few of them hold onto the stone they take with them that day. And they become a little more compassionate, a little less judgmental. They look for opportunities to move past their own guilt and shame and fear. I think I've met one or two of them over the years.

It's surprising how many times people seek us out as ministers in order to confess their sin. Not parishioners, not the regular folks, but people passing through, friends of friends, people we meet in line at the grocery store. I can't tell you how many times a stranger has sought me out to tell me about their sin. I used to try to minimize their offenses. "Oh, that doesn't sound like such a bad thing." "Don't be so hard on yourself." "We all make mistakes."

I no longer do that. The fact is people seek us out because we are ministers of the church of Jesus Christ and they feel alienated from God. And that alienation is real. My job – our job – is not to minimize the transgression but to point out the source of forgiveness. It is our job to speak of the one who gives second and third and fourth chances. It is our job to speak of the one who welcomes sinners home – arms open wide.

Friends, believe the good news of the Gospel.

In Jesus Christ we are forgiven.

Amen.