

“The Woman Caught in Adultery”
March 15, 2020
Pennfield Presbyterian Church
The Rev. Annemarie S. Kidder

John 8:1-11

Some years ago I received a court summons in the mail. I had been driving a little over the speed limit and got caught—a lot. Twelve points of traffic violations forced me into court. By the time I arrived, about a hundred people were outside the courtroom waiting to be called in. The judge was dealing with the worst offenders last. I was called in four hours later—yes as the last one in line. My throat made a croaking noise, my knees were jelly-like. And when I heard the judge say that my speeding had racked up a sentence of at least five years in prison, I couldn't even respond because I was busy considering whether to faint or to die, or do both.

That's how the woman in our story might have felt. She had been hauled into court accused of living the fast life. Adultery was the charge, the breaking of the marriage covenant. We don't know the details. We may wonder why her partner went scott free. But we can be sure that she was guilty somehow.

In her case, the arresting officers were not traffic patrols but men of the upper echelon. Scribes and Pharisees both had been lying in wait for hours behind shrubbery and near closed doors. It's not a pretty picture, she being dragged in half-clad shortly after the act, while her accusers were still giddy from making this salacious catch. No wonder this story is not included in our lectionary, has brackets in our Bibles, and will rarely makes it into a sermon.

But today we get to put ourselves in this woman's shoes. Yes, she has been caught. And yes, she knows that what she has done is wrong. Adultery is punishable by stoning, and hearing the elders mention it out loud is no surprise to her. She knows. She knows. And she is terrified. For she can already feel the stones pelting against her womb, her ribs, her head.

Have you ever felt stones being aimed at you long before they were cast? Maybe they were just whispers behind a shielded hand. Maybe they were a stare, a raised eyebrow, a scornful eye. Or maybe they were an assumption about your character, a prejudice, a slanted and skewed judgment made about you that voided and nullified whatever good you had to offer, whatever gifts and talents you were putting to work. If you have, then you also know that there is absolutely nothing that you can do about it. You cannot change someone's bias. You cannot eradicate their racism or sexism toward you. And “talking things over,” as we like to call it, seems to only deepen the divide.

Look at what this woman does. I have to say that I admire her. Because she seems to remain utterly calm. Here she had been dragged before a judge in a most dehumanizing way. She had been ganged up upon. She had been singled-out and doubly victimized. Surely she could have cried out against the violence and ill will at the hands of her captors and let her temper underscore her guilt.

Instead of flaring up, she entrusts herself to the one who is her judge. Yes, there are judges who sit in courts on a bench and pronounce verdicts. Yes, there are people who judge and make us pay for what we did wrong. But you know what: there is ultimately only one judge and he will never be wrong in his assessment of who we are and what we did.

That judge is Jesus. And he saves this woman's life. How does he do it? The elders of Jerusalem had

come equipped with smooth round stones in their hands. They were already poised to aim them at her body. But Jesus speaks a word. And it is a word so powerful that their fists drop the stones, their index fingers retract and curl back: "Whoever is without sin, cast the first stone."

It is something that we as Christians are still learning: Casting the first stone is not a fit activity for sinners. It is not seemly to accuse and condemn. We teach children that whenever they blame and accuse with one finger, they have still three other fingers pointing back at them. We here in church teach that there is only one who is in a position and in a God-ordained role to accuse and to condemn: and that is Christ. And Christ came for us, Christ died for us, Christ rose and intercedes on our behalf, so that anyone who is in Christ is a new creation, the old life is gone and a new life, a life freed of blame and of blaming others has begun. Do you believe this?

When I stood in that court room and heard the judge announce my possible sentence, I didn't faint or die but I did pray. And then I heard the voice of the judge, or was it the voice of Jesus, saying, "I am not going to send you to prison today; not yet anyway. So go for now and speed no more."

Friends, we all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. And we are bound to sin again and again, even if some of us will think twice about speeding. So, as sinners, let's be more merciful toward one another, because we have received mercy. Let's be forgiving, because we have been forgiven. Let's be generous in our assessment of others, because the generosity of God has saved us from eternal death, has touched us, and has come to us this day. Amen.