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John 7:53–8:11

Twenty-third Message

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THE LEAST, THE LOST, AND THE LEFT-OUT¹

As we begin another year we return to the gospel of John. It's always a good thing to immerse ourselves in the gospels. Oftentimes we are tempted to replace Jesus with a religious lifestyle. We forget who Jesus is and who we are, but John helps us to re-center our lives.

Compared to the other three gospels, John's account is unique on at least two levels. First, the language he uses could be part of the vocabulary of a first grader. The metaphors and images are drawn from everyday life—common things like wind, birth, water, light, bread and wine. But these have the effect of a pebble thrown into a pond, causing the water to extend in ever-widening circles. Our understanding of what it means to believe and follow Jesus grows and expands as we contemplate the meaning of these metaphors. The depth of John's insight causes endless reflections on how we relate to God.

Secondly, John's story is unique. He relates it in a completely different way than the other three gospel writers. There is no mention of Jesus' birth, his baptism, temptation or transfiguration, nor is there any reference to remembering him by eating bread and drinking wine. There is no account of Jesus sweating blood in the garden, appearing before the Sanhedrin, or crying out on the cross because God had forsaken him. There is not a single reference to his parables.

Instead, John builds his story around seven signs and seven "I am" statements. The number seven harkens back to creation and fulfillment. John presents the story of a new creation: "In the beginning..." Following the signs come lengthy discourses and conversations with all kinds of people. Eugene Peterson comments: "John is a most leisurely storyteller. He takes his time, he repeats, he circles back upon himself. He uses words lovingly, savoring them. Or he holds a sentence only slightly, to shift the angle of refraction and bring out another color."²

John is a poet. His Jesus is majestic and mystical. At times we miss the fast-paced action of the Synoptics. But if we just want the facts we will be disappointed. John's gospel does not set out gospel truth or information on how to live the Christian life from a drive-up window. We are forced to slow down and reflect. The major themes of believing and loving don't come quickly or easily.

Beginning with chapter 8, we come now to the incident of the woman caught in adultery. Despite the fact that this is a familiar story it is highly unlikely that it was part of the original text or that it was even written by John. It is not included in any of the early Greek manuscripts except for one, in other early manuscripts or the writings of the early Church Fathers. There is difficulty in attributing this story to John since it contains numerous expressions and constructions that are found nowhere else in his gospel but which are characteristic of the Synoptic gospels, Luke in particular. However, there is no reason to doubt the truth of this story. It is similar to ac-

counts found in other sources, and it has parallels with stories which appear in the Synoptics.

So what is the purpose behind the story and why does it appear here in our Bible? First, it is sandwiched neatly between two scenes connected to the Feast of Tabernacles, which is the context for chapters 7 and 8 and probably chapter 9 as well. Prior to this story, Jesus proclaims that he is the water of life and that believers will become a source of living water. Subsequently Jesus will say that he is the light of the world. The story is illustrative of what it means to be living water and what happens when light shines in the darkness. This is how Jesus lived, and how we are to live, too.

Secondly, this chapter is an appropriate place for a story or illustration. In John we discover this interleaving of lengthy discourse and story: Nicodemus, the woman at the well, the healings of the official's son, the paralytic and the blind man, and the raising of Lazarus from the dead. Teaching and storytelling form a powerful combination when blended in the right ratio. Other reasons for the story's placement will become apparent later on.

With this we come to our text.

Everyone went to his home. But Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. Early in the morning He came again into the temple, and all the people were coming to Him; and He sat down and began to teach them. The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman caught in adultery, and having set her in the center of the court, they said to Him, "Teacher, this woman has been caught in adultery, in the very act. Now in the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women; what then do You say?" They were saying this, testing Him, so that they might have grounds for accusing Him. (John 7:53–8:6a NASB)

The story begins rather abruptly. Recall that the context is the Feast of Tabernacles, the biggest and most popular of all the Jewish feasts. Chapter 7 records the discourse on living water spoken by Jesus at the temple on the last day of the feast. When everyone left, "Jesus went to the Mount of Olives." This is reminiscent of Jesus' pattern, referred to by Luke during the week before Jesus' passion when he stayed at Bethany and stopped at the Mount of Olives (Luke 21:37). Perhaps this is even the setting of the actual story.³

Early in the morning, Jesus went to the temple and people gathered to hear him teach. This probably occurred in the outer court, as it was common for the scribes to gather their students there. While Jesus is sitting and teaching, the scribes and Pharisees approach him.⁴ They address him as teacher, which is equivalent to rabbi, a title of respect. But they have not come to listen to him. Instead, they drag a woman with them and place her right in the middle of the group of men listening to him.

She had been caught in the very act of adultery and was seized and arrested. There is no mention of the man or his whereabouts. Either he was fleet of foot and escaped, or the accusers were chau-

vinistic. One might wonder too how the religious authorities knew the woman and what she was up to. Approaching Jesus, the Pharisees raise a question concerning the law. They are not interested in justice or caring for the woman. She is simply a pawn in their game. They want to put Jesus on the spot, to test him. This is the same word used concerning Jesus' "testing" the disciples in chapter 6.

To what law were the religious leaders referring? This depends on whether the woman was married or single and betrothed. Deuteronomy 22 lists three scenarios of unfaithfulness. First, if a man claimed that his wife was not a virgin when he married her, and his claim was substantiated, then she was to be stoned (Deut 22:13-21). Second, death was prescribed for all unfaithful wives and their lovers, but no mode of execution, such as stoning, was laid down (Lev 20:10; Deut 22:22). In this case the Mishnah prescribed strangling. And third, stoning was the biblically-prescribed punishment for a betrothed virgin who was unfaithful to her intended, but this punishment was to be meted out to both sexual partners (Deut 22:23-24). However, there is little evidence that stoning was carried out very often in first-century Palestine.

The scribes and Pharisees were seeking a basis for accusing Jesus so they could bring serious charges against him (Mark 3:2; 10:2; Luke 6:7). If Jesus disavowed the law, his credibility would instantly be undermined and he would be dismissed as a lawless person. If he upheld the law, he would be supporting a position that was unpopular and probably not in use. More importantly, it would have been hard to square this with his teaching on compassion and forgiveness.

This brings us to Jesus' response.

But Jesus stooped down and with His finger wrote on the ground. But when they persisted in asking Him, He straightened up, and said to them, "He who is without sin among you, let him be the first to throw a stone at her." Again He stooped down and wrote on the ground. When they heard it, they began to go out one by one, beginning with the older ones, and He was left alone, and the woman, where she was, in the center of the court. (8:6b-9)

Jesus stoops down and writes on the ground. In fact, he does this twice. We are not told why, or what he wrote, but we can't help conjecturing. Perhaps he was imitating the practice of Roman magistrates who first wrote their sentence and then read it. Or perhaps he was drawing attention to Jeremiah 17:13:

**"O LORD, the hope of Israel,
All who forsake You will be put to shame.
Those who turn away on earth will be written down,
Because they have forsaken the fountain of living water, even the
LORD." (Jer 17:13)**

Some suggest that Jesus was writing about two verses in Exodus 23 concerning giving false witness: "You shall not bear a false report; do not join your hand with a wicked man to be a malicious witness" (Exod 23:1); "Keep far from a false charge, and do not kill the innocent or the righteous, for I will not acquit the guilty" (Exod 23:7).

Or perhaps it was not the content, but the action of writing that is important. Jesus writing with his finger reminds us of God's writing the Ten Commandments with his finger. We might also recall that the Ten Commandments were written twice at Sinai (Exod 31:18; Deut 9:10).

But the scribes and Pharisees persist and continue questioning Jesus. He responds with an invitation to the one who is without sin

to cast the first stone. This is a direct reference to Deut 13:9 and 17:7 (Lev 24:14), instructing the witness to throw the first stone at the accused: "But you shall surely kill him; your hand shall be first against him to put him to death, and afterwards the hand of all the people" (Deut 13:9); "The hand of the witnesses shall be first against him to put him to death, and afterward the hand of all the people. So you shall purge the evil from your midst" (Deut 17:7).

Witnesses did not have to be sinless, but they could not be guilty of the particular sin in question. When it came to sexual sins, the woman was more likely to be in jeopardy, since the man could skate free. Women always suffer more than men. But Jesus cuts through that double standard.

One by one the scribes and Pharisees leave, beginning with the oldest. Some manuscripts say that they were "convicted by their own conscience." Those who had come to shame Jesus depart in shame.

Continuing, Jesus has a discussion with the woman.

Straightening up, Jesus said to her, "Woman, where are they? Did no one condemn you?" She said, "No one, Lord." And Jesus said, "I do not condemn you, either. Go. From now on sin no more." (8:10-11)

After the men depart, Jesus is left alone, while the accused woman is still standing in the courtyard. He addresses her with respect, using the term "woman," the same word he used for his mother in chapters 2 and 19, for the woman at the well in chapter 4, and Mary in chapter 20 (2:4; 4:21; 19:26; 20:13). He does not ask if she is guilty, only if there is anyone who condemns her. Jesus does not condemn her either. He instructs her to simply go her way and sin no more. The story ends as abruptly as it began.

There is a great deal of obvious truth in this story, but it is important to flesh it out and take it to heart. As we do so, let us reflect on the three people or groups mentioned. Perhaps we shall find ourselves here.

The Scribes and Pharisees

First, the scribes and Pharisees, the religious leadership. For the Pharisees, proper religious standards and codes take top priority. Law takes precedence over grace and compassion. The Pharisee judges acceptability based on religious performance and sin management. Such people regard themselves as completely righteous, giving no thought to any weakness or imperfection. On the other hand, the Pharisee regards others as less worthy or inferior because all he sees in them is their sin, weaknesses or imperfections. If a person is guilty of sin, the Pharisee judges and condemns, focusing on externals only, never the heart. The Pharisee may be well meaning but he is blind to his own condition. The story illustrates something that Jesus says in both chapters 7 and 8: "Do not judge according to appearance, but judge with righteous judgment" (7:24); "You judge according to the flesh; I am not judging anyone" (8:15). This might be another reason for the placement of the story at the beginning of chapter 8.

But why are the Pharisees so upset at Jesus? There is something much deeper going on here. Even though Rome ruled Palestine, the religious leaders were the top dogs, the power brokers, the CEO's and CFO's for religious life among the people of God. This elite group controlled the playground at recess. But Jesus is upsetting their world and threatening their power and control. He is seeking to eliminate the thing that makes the Pharisees superior—comparing themselves to others. But they want to eliminate this threat posed by Jesus.

The Feast of Tabernacles is connected to the Exodus, when God gave Israel the law. God had to re-write the Ten Commandments because Israel fashioned the golden calf and committed idolatry. In the Old Testament, God labels idolatry as spiritual adultery. Throughout Israel's history, the nation played the harlot when they worshiped the Canaanite gods. Perhaps the story is placed here as a picture of idolatrous Israel.

By writing twice on the ground, Jesus is saying that Israel was still committing adultery like she did at Sinai. It is not the woman but the Jewish leadership who should be questioned. Moses interceded for an adulterous people in the OT. Jesus is the new Moses, who now comes to God's people to deliver them from false worship—the worship of religion and law rather than God.

The Pharisees are a negative example in this story. We would never want to act like that, would we? But sadly, many churches are run by leaders who want to maintain control and are threatened by the work of the Spirit in the lives of sinners. There is always a tendency to focus on morality to solve the problem of human depravity. And we are always drawn to be a part of the in-group, the elite, the powerful, whether at church or school or work, even though we do not like what they stand for or approve their tactics. Most of us have some pharisaical tendencies to which we are blind. We find satisfaction in handing down judgment on others. We convince ourselves that we are superior compared to them. But Jesus says, “Let him who is without sin cast the first stone.”

The Woman/Sinner

Secondly, let us reflect on the woman who was in the wrong place at the wrong time. Caught in the very act, doing something she should not be doing, she is paraded in front of the temple and placed among a group of men to be used as a pawn in a much larger game. What a dilemma.

Amazingly, we do not know anything about her. Unlike the woman at the well, she hardly speaks. We don't know if she stands before these men filled with fear for her life, paralyzed with guilt and shame over her sin, sternly defiant, or whether she could not care less. We don't know if she is seeking grace or whether she wants Jesus to save her. But it's safe to say that she feels very strange and all alone.

I don't know if you have ever experienced that sensation. In high school I took a summer school class at a school in downtown Omaha, not the best part of town. On the bus ride home one day I became the target of a group of boys. They began to throw insults my way and I was afraid. I wondered if I would make it out alive. I imagine the woman felt that kind of fear.

I picture the woman as a member of Sinners Anonymous. You know the line: “Hi, my name is Terry. I'm a sinner.” She is a member of another club—the least, the lost, and the left-out. Somewhere along the line she got lost. She had probably been abused and taken advantage of by men. She had been made to feel despised and worthless. She probably feels tremendous guilt and shame even if she won't admit it. She is treated as an unclean outcast. Many women can empathize with her. They have suffered the indignity of being mistreated and mishandled by angry and selfish men.

The woman represents the way many people are made to feel in a church, which is condemned. They feel unwelcome, different or unclean. Being around a Pharisee is like being around a policeman. You immediately feel self-conscious and check the speedometer. You

are afraid of doing anything wrong so you walk on eggshells. You can never risk exposing your heart, because it might get stepped on.

The least, the lost, and the left-out become fodder for church people who take pride in their clean appearance. The ironic thing is that they are focused on being a part of some accepted group so they will not have to be one of the least, the lost, and the left-out. They conceal and cover up with a mask of respectability. Oftentimes a sinner will either reject the church completely or conform to a code of behavior to find acceptance. For people like this woman, the church can become the biggest obstacle to knowing God and experiencing the healing of the heart.

Most people if they are truly honest would admit that they too are part of the least, the lost, and the left-out. I could stand here and pretend that I have it all together, but the truth is that I know all too well what it feels like to be more lost than found, more lacking than having, more excluded than included. If you are one of the least, the lost, and the left-out, then you are my friend. All of us struggle with sin. No one wants to be exposed, so we keep things hidden in a charade that accomplishes nothing. People will reject Jesus because they love the darkness more than the light, or because others don't love them the way they want to be loved. But hopefully, they won't reject Jesus because they feel judged by the body of Christ.

Jesus

Finally, there is Jesus. He does not panic or become fearful. He is completely in control of the situation. He deals with the Pharisees by cutting through their attack and leaves them hanging their heads. He levels the playing field between the woman and the leaders. He obliterates the idea that they are superior to her, that religious performance and morality are more acceptable to God. The leaders have to come to grips with their own hearts and their own sin.

Jesus responds to the woman in two ways. His first response is grace and forgiveness and acceptance rather than condemnation. Listen to Brennan Manning's words:

His eyes called out to her, “Come to me. Come now. Don't wait until you have your act cleaned up and your head on straight. Don't delay until you think you are properly disposed and free of pride and lust, jealousy and self-hatred. Come to me in your brokenness and sinfulness, with all your fears and insecurities, and I will comfort you. I will come to you right where you live and love you just the way you are, and not the way you think you should be.”⁵

Manning tells about the time he woke up one morning in a drunken stupor in a doorway on the streets of Fort Lauderdale, shoeless and with vomit on his sweater. He saw a young woman coming down the street with a little boy. The boy broke away from his mother and approached Manning, but she came up behind the boy, cupped his eyes with her hand, and said, “Don't look at that filth.” When Jesus looked at the woman he did not see filth; he saw a fragile heart in need of love.

Jesus knows she is guilty, and she knows it too. But he doesn't need to hear the gory details. He doesn't need to hear her story. He doesn't need to psychoanalyze her. He doesn't need to get a written statement or confession of repentance from her. He simply tells her that no one condemns her and he does not condemn her either. To her he says, “Your heavenly Father loves you completely in your filth.” This woman who is one of the least, the lost, and the left-out is passionately embraced and loved by God.

Jesus came to save the world, not to judge or condemn the world (John 3:17; 12:47). The world is judged already. He came to offer grace and compassion and an opportunity for salvation. The Word becomes flesh and reveals, explains and exegetes God himself. Jesus does what the Father does: He forgives sins. People can either respond or reject him.

Jesus' second response does have to do with sin, demonstrating that God is concerned about sin and does not overlook it. Jesus simply tells the woman not to do it anymore. What does it mean to "go, and sin no more"? It doesn't mean that if we can stop sinning, God will accept us. It doesn't mean that we will never sin again. It doesn't mean that we can do whatever we want because God won't condemn us. It simply means that when we have an encounter with Jesus, we can immediately turn away from the things that are enslaving us. We don't have to live in shame and guilt. We don't have to listen to those who condemn us. We don't have to listen to our own hearts that would condemn us. We don't have to become sinless to receive mercy. We receive mercy, and the proper response to mercy received is to live joyfully in a love relationship with God. Based on my past and my tendency to punish myself, I need to hear that message over and over. God really does forgive me.

The amazing thing to me is that Jesus does not know if the woman wants his grace or will respond to it. He simply pours out grace. He doesn't need to check up on her to see if she gets it right. The outcome will take care of itself; either she will respond or not. The only hint that she does respond is that she calls Jesus "Lord."

The story is an example of what Jesus is like and what the church should be like. Our first response should be one of grace and compassion rather than an investigation of how deep the sin goes or judgment as to a person's character or motive. We should not make a habit of comparing ourselves to one another so that we can feel good about ourselves. We may have made a mess of our lives, but law and morality is not the answer. Confessing our sin to one another keeps the playing field level and puts us all humbly in need of God's grace and forgiveness.

Do you feel like a member of the least, the lost, and the left-out? When I first became a Christian, back in my early twenties, I found this poem in my grandmother's Bible. It has always been an encouragement to me. Hopefully it will be to you, too.

The Touch of the Master's Hand

Myra B. Welch

Tw'as battered and scared, and the auctioneer
Thought it scarcely worth his while
To waste much time on the old violin,
But held it up with a smile.
"What am I bidden, good folks?" he cried,
"Who'll start the bidding for me?
A dollar, a dollar—now two, only two—
Two dollars, and who'll make it three?"

"Three dollars once, three dollars twice,
Going for three"...but no!
From the room far back a gray-haired man
Came forward and picked up the bow;
Then wiping the dust from the old violin,
And tightening up all the strings,
He played a melody, pure and sweet,
As sweet as an angel sings.

The music ceased and the auctioneer
With a voice that was quiet and low,
Said: "Now, what am I bid for the old violin?"
And he held it up with the bow;
"A thousand dollars—and who'll make it two?
Two thousand—and who'll make it three?
Three thousand once, three thousand twice,
And going—and gone," said he.

The people cheered, but some of them cried,
"We do not quite understand.
What changed its worth?" The man replied:
"The touch of the master's hand."
And many a man with life out of tune,
And battered and torn with sin,
Is auctioned cheap to a thoughtless crowd,
Much like the old violin.

A mess of pottage, a glass of wine,
A game and he travels on,
He's going once, he's going twice
He's going—and almost gone!
But the Master comes, and the foolish crowd,
Can never quite understand,
The worth of a soul, and the change that's wrought
By the touch of the Master's hand.

1. Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 24.

2. Eugene Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 91.

3. We might note that there are several expressions in verse 2 that are typical of Luke and Acts: the word for "dawn" or "early in the morning" is found only in Luke 24:1 and Acts 5:21; the words for "came" or "appear" and "people" are common in Luke and Acts but rare in John; the phrase "he sat down to teach them" is characteristic of the Synoptics (Matt 5:1-2; Luke 4:20; 5:3); verse 2 is closely parallel with Luke 21:38, "And all the people would get up early in the morning to come to Him in the temple to listen to Him."

4. The phrase "scribes and Pharisees" often appears in the Synoptics, but never in John.

5. Brennan Manning, *A Glimpse of Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2004), 36.