

The traditional explanation for this behavior is that Jesus confronted the Pharisees with the truth that we are all sinners, and we should, therefore, be merciful toward those who sin. Now, that's a good, grace-filled lesson we all need to learn. It makes a good sermon. It teaches well In Sunday School.

But there's a problem: it's not what Jesus meant! Confronting the Pharisees with their generic human sinfulness is not what Jesus intended. To know this, we have to go back to the original Greek. The root for the Greek word used for 'sin' is *hamartano*. It's a commonly used word in the New Testament. But only once is it cast in the negative tense of being 'without sin' (*anamartétos*) – here in John 8:7 – where it means not 'sin' in the conventional sense, but 'to miss the mark.' We use that phrase today when we have made a mistake, strayed from the path, or gotten something very, very wrong. We talk about our youthful indiscretions, our poor decisions, as times when we missed the mark.

I can't imagine the Pharisees claiming that they had never missed the mark in the past. In their heart of hearts, they knew they had committed sins at some point in their life. Which makes it plausible to preach and teach that they went away because they recognized their own sinful past and, thus, were inclined to show mercy to the woman. Greek even has a word for past sins – *proamartano* – but that is not the word used in our text.

Jesus uses *anamartétos*, a present tense word, suggesting a current state of sin, an active condition: the Pharisees are in the very act of missing the mark as they stand there with the rocks in their hands. Jesus is not saying that someone who has never sinned may cast the first stone: he is saying that the Pharisee who is not in the act of sinning *right now* may cast the first stone! Jesus is suggesting that the self-righteous and morally upright Pharisees are, at this very moment, transgressing the Law of Moses by stoning this woman caught in adultery.

Which means we have to re-think the whole scene, go back to the beginning of the story, and reexamine the details. *Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?* (v. 5).

Here are the facts. The woman was caught in the act of adultery. Now, we all know it takes two to tango and two to commit adultery, but the Pharisees only bring the woman to be stoned. The Pharisees admit to having caught her *in the very act of committing adultery* which means they interrupted something, catching both parties in a very compromising

position. The Pharisees apprehended both the man and the woman, yet they only bring the woman before Jesus.

This is significant because the Pharisees quote the Law of Moses as justification for their actions. In Deuteronomy 22:22 it says: *If a man is caught lying with the wife of another man, both of them shall die, the man who lay with the woman as well as the woman. So you shall purge the evil from Israel.* And in Leviticus 20:10 it reads: *If a man commits adultery with the wife of his neighbor, both the adulterer and the adulteress shall be put to death.* Both the man and the woman are equally guilty and should be equally punished. According to the law, both the man and the woman should be stoned to death. What's more, the man is to be punished first!

By admitting to finding the couple together *in the very act* and by quoting only the part of the Law that suits their purpose, the Pharisees make themselves complicit in a miscarriage of God's justice. They condemn the woman for her sins, ignoring the sins of the man.

As the Pharisees question Jesus and push him to make a ruling on this case, it becomes apparent that Jesus knows the Law better than the Pharisees. As he writes with his finger on the ground, the Pharisees see the truth of their own misdeed revealed. The older ones, the elders, the wisest ones who had studied the Law the longest, recognize their current state of sinfulness, they are ashamed of their behavior, and they steal away one by one.

The Bible never tells us what Jesus writes on the ground – not in so many words – but there is only one thing Jesus could have written that would shame the Pharisees into submission. I believe Jesus stopped them in their tracks by writing, "Where is the man?" With that simple question Jesus reveals the sin of the Pharisees at the moment they bring the woman to him. With that simple question Jesus forces them to examine their lives and confront their sin.

"Where is the man?" The question stops the Pharisees cold. No one likes to have their sins pointed out. No one likes to have their misdeeds publicly proclaimed. No one likes to have to admit that they are wrong. But sometimes we need to have our actions called into question. Sometimes we're blind to the reality of our sinfulness. And it is the true friend who will call us out and steer us back onto the straight and narrow path.

It's easy to see this story as a condemnation of sins past and a story of grace given. And that's a great interpretation, a lesson worthy of teaching again and again. But it's too easy. It's

easier to ask forgiveness for sins past than it is to ask forgiveness for sins committed now. Ancient history's mistakes are easier to pardon than today's mistakes. The sins of our youth are easier to excuse than the sins of our maturity. But they're all sins. They all need forgiveness. And that forgiveness cannot come until we ask, "Where is the man?"

When he asked this, Jesus was really asking, "What is your sin?" The Pharisees, caught in their own deception with their sinfulness revealed, sneak away and Jesus is left alone with the woman. He asks her, *Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?* (v. 10). When she says "No one, sir," Jesus responds, *Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again* (v. 12).

We hope that the woman went home and led a better life from that day forward. We also hope that the Pharisees learned something about God's justice and mercy that day, and that they found their lives transformed by the encounter with Jesus. And as we read this story anew, we can only hope that as we find forgiveness for past sins. We can only hope that the light of gospel truth will also shine on our lives so that we might see the wrong we do today and give us the courage to mend our ways.

God's grace did not condemn the woman or the Pharisees; it freed them to live better in the future than they had in the past. God's grace made no judgment; it simply invited the woman and the Pharisees to consider a better way. God's grace respected and loved the woman and the Pharisees enough not to leave them in their sinful state, but to reveal their sin and help them move one step closer to God's Kingdom.

What Jesus wrote in the sand was profound enough to challenge the Pharisees to reconsider their own lives. What Jesus wrote in the sand was gracious enough to redeem the woman's life. What Jesus wrote in the sand was loving enough to transcend time and transform our lives today. Where is the man? What is your sin? I do not condemn you. I love you. Go and sin no more. Welcome to the Kingdom of Heaven.

# What Jesus Wrote

**Sunday, August 17, 2014**

**The Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN**

***John 8:1-11***

Last week we asked, "Why did David choose five smooth stones from the stream when he confronted Goliath?" That sermon sparked a great deal of conversation this week. It seems many of people have unanswered questions about the Bible stories we've learned. About midweek, someone challenged me to answer the question, "What did Jesus write on the ground with his finger when faced with the woman caught in adultery?" I suspect it was a "stump the preacher" kind of question, but never one to shy away from a challenge, here's my best answer to that question.

The Pharisees came to Jesus, while he was teaching publicly, and asked him, *Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?* (v. 5). The Gospel writer John, says they asked this in order to trap Jesus and *to have a basis for accusing him* (v. 6). The religious leaders wanted to discredit Jesus in front of the people, to dispute his authority, and to regain some of the power they had lost in previous encounters with Jesus.

But it didn't work. Jesus quietly bent down and wrote on the ground with his finger. As they continued to question him, Jesus stood and said to them, *If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her* (v. 7). At these words, the condemning Pharisees, beginning with the older ones, slink away in shame.