

June 12, 2016 ‘And in Jesus Christ, His Only Son, Our Lord’ John 8:1-11
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As part four of our continuing Summer Sermon Series on the Apostle’s Creed, today you’ll get some real meat and potatoes; something of substance to work with. I have been trying to decide how best to approach ‘Jesus Christ, His Only Son, Our Lord’- which could surely cover a lot of territory.

I’ll begin with a question for all of us today.

Here it is: if, (according to science fiction ‘Star Trek’ technology) you were able to be ‘beamed back’, transported in time, to Jesus’ lifetime, when would you choose to be in his presence? What scene would you be taken back to witness? At any time in Jesus’ life....

Think about this for a minute, and then share it with someone around you. Take a minute or so to do this... []

Any answer is a good and wonderful answer, and I would urge you to spend some time with that image, to identify why it’s right for you; what in particular it says to you...

Though holding Jesus as my Lord and Savior is a personal truth for me, it is by no means private, so I’ll share with you the scene in Jesus’ life to which if given a time machine, I’d like to be transported. It is our New Testament lesson for today.

-- John 8:1-11

Early in the morning he came again to the temple. All the people came to him and he sat down and began to teach them.

The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery; and making her stand before all of them, they said to him, “Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?” They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him.

Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, “Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.”

And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground. When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders; and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him.

Jesus straightened up and said to her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” She said, “No one, sir.”

And Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.”

This scene is fraught with drama, and is as familiar as most any other of Jesus' encounters in the Gospels. What I had forgotten about this passage are some of its internal and external controversies.

After I tell you about some of these, I'll get to why this is the scene I'd really want to witness and what it means for me, in terms of how I understand Jesus as Messiah, Lord, and Son of God.

As seems to happen with some frequency, this is a passage that doesn't appear in our regular lectionary cycle. This is so for a number of important reasons. This is a text, a story, a 'pericope' (in technical jargon) saddled with the weight of textual criticism. Scholars through the modern era have debated its Biblical veracity, whether it is truly a story that dates back to Jesus. The consensus is finally 'yes', even though the story was omitted from several of the earliest existing versions of John's gospel. Some scholars quibble over word usage, that parts of this story seem more akin to Luke's gospel than John. The phrase 'scribes and Pharisees' occurs only here in John's Gospel, and Jesus is referred to as 'Teacher' (a favorite title for Jesus that Luke uses), and not 'Rabbi', as is customary in John.

Yet this story is also included in the Catholic 'Vulgate' translation, by Jerome, from 382 AD, and is also part of the vaunted King James Bible of 1611. The bottom line is that it passes internal scholarly muster.

The other controversial issue about this passage may be more timely and news worthy. It is a woman who is accused, caught in the act, so they say. So, where is the man? Does he get off scot-free? So it seems. Sexism is clearly at play, but it's also more than that alone.

The scribes and Pharisees claim to have found this woman in sin and want to do all they can to hold her there, and also attempt to trap Jesus into defending her. Jesus takes the bait, quite willingly, and turns it right back on them.

Their line of questioning gives him the raw material for his response. Jesus defends this woman over against the male majority, undercutting their collective authority and even the Law of Moses, and he does it so deftly we barely recognize how profoundly it's done. It's a clear statement both of his authority and their lack of it.

Now, almost everyone who has ever read or heard this story has given in to curiosity

and asked, “What did he write in the sand?” (Have you ever wondered that?) The Catholic scholar and storyteller John Shea* (my go-to scholar in all things John) says that **what** Jesus wrote is not as important as how he did it. He wrote with his finger, he wrote on earth, and he wrote twice. These are enacted answers to the questions the scribes and Pharisees ask.

Let me explain. In the book of Exodus, God writes the Ten Commandments and gives the two stone tablets to Moses. The Commandments had divine authorship, written with the ‘finger of God.’

Jesus shows his closeness to God by writing into the makings of stone, the earth itself. And as the Commandments to the Hebrews were repeatedly broken, generation after generation, the term used by the prophets for this was consistently uniform. The term was adultery, infidelity- the Hebrews went after false gods and practiced unfaithfulness. After Moses came down from the mountain the first time, what he found was a lawless, adulterous people. Moses was so mad he threw the tablets down, smashing them to bits. It took a second writing for the Law of the Tablets to take hold, for the covenant to be renewed and made right. So the scribes and Pharisees in this story represent a first draft, a people unfaithful to God’s law of love and mercy. They do not yet understand or practice the true teachings of Moses, something that Jesus is about to show them.

Now, the story of the people of Israel does not end with the eradication of Israel, but rather with God’s unrelenting mercy, forgiveness and grace given to them, totally unwarranted and undeserved. “The Lord is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast mercy, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation...”(Exodus 34:6)

So it is that Jesus writes in the sand, once...and asks for the one who has not yet sinned to cast the first stone, then waits...and then he bends down to write again.

Israel was spared because God had forgiven them for worshipping their many gods. It was through forgiveness, mercy and grace that Israel survived at all. Only when they recognized that it was the mercy of God that saved them could they ever have a chance of seeing God’s mercy alive in someone else.

So Jesus writes with his finger- the sign of God’s authorship. He writes twice-the sign of God’s forgiveness, and he writes on the earth- a sign for all children of creation.

And the scribes and Pharisees finally ‘get it.’ They walk away, one by one. Now Jesus

is left with the woman. He rises to speak, face to face. There is no condemnation, only a simple question. “Where are they? Has no one condemned you?” “No one, sir.”

Jesus’ response, his lack of condemnation, reflects that this woman has committed no offense against him, and that God’s mercy prevails over the misery she has so recently been put through.

That’s an analysis of the story for you. Now I need to tell you why I would want to be there, witnessing this scene.

It has to do, I think, with why any of us would want to return to any of the scenes we’ve chosen in Jesus’ life.

There’s something we identify with, one way or the other, in our chosen scene; whether it be Jesus healing someone or feeding the 5,000, arguing with scribes & Pharisees, being born in a manger, sharing his last meal in the Upper Room, or our wanting to linger at the cross, or maybe outside the tomb.... There’s something about who we are in the story we choose, and the gift that Jesus brings to us in it.

This story of the accused woman tells me about something we’ve all experienced one way or another; and that is shame. We’ve felt insufficient, or not smart enough, not pretty enough, too fat, too skinny, have fallen short of expectations in some crucial way, and have been judged for it. (Remember how it feels?)

Something about us, what we’ve done or who we are, wasn’t right.

The story that triggers this in me comes from when I guess I was 7 or 8 years old. I was in the back seat of my Uncle John’s car, a big Chevy, and was with all the boy Blair cousins on the way to the Bowling Alley. There was my cousin John & Keith, Joey, and my older brother, Ed.

Uncle John called back to all of us, half-jokingly, “Does everyone have their bowling shoes?” I remember that I yelled out, “I do, I do! I have my Hush Puppies, and they work great!”

Well, Uncle John just chuckled, but everybody else laughed at me. (Who wears Hush Puppies to the Bowling Alley, after all? I had no Dad to teach me how to bowl, either...) I remember turning red in embarrassment, and not opening my mouth for the rest of the trip, or the way back, either.

It was such a small thing, really, but it’s amazing how well I remember that, and how

that felt.

Here's another example, not my own, but of a much better way to deal with what could be a shaming experience. I heard this account on NPR radio earlier this week.

There was an interview with Bao Nguyen, the mayor of Garden Grove, CA, in Orange County, who's now running for a congressional seat.

His family came to the U.S. from Vietnam in the early 1980's. On his first day of kindergarten, the teacher asked him how to pronounce his first name. And he said, my name is Bao. And she said, 'Bao, like bowwow, like a dog?' And all the kids burst out laughing. And so she asked him if it was OK if she called him Bob? And he said, 'No, my name is Bao.' And there was no shame in him at all, he knew who he was.

(He was raised in a strong Catholic family and had experienced much worse than that before. He knew who he was in Christ, and no one was going to change that.)

The point is that Jesus is the one who claims us, who arrives again and again, in teachable moments, even years later, to call us to him and to model what we have learned to others.

Jesus is One of Us. He leads us, now and always. He teaches us, when we pay close attention, and he forgives us, again and again and again, then he beckons us to follow once more.

May we be given the grace, mercy forgiveness and understanding to follow his lead.
Amen.

* John Shea, Spiritual Wisdom of the Gospels for Christian Preachers And Teachers: The Relentless Widow, Year C, p.91