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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
3/13/2013, Midweek Lent 4  
John 8:1-11, The Woman Caught in Adultery

PRAYER OF THE DAY (Lent 4)

☞ God of all mercy, by your power to heal and to forgive, graciously cleanse us from all sin and make us strong; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

HOLY SCRIPTURE .....John 8:1-11, KJV

Jesus went unto the mount of Olives. <sup>2</sup>And early in the morning he came again into the temple, and all the people came unto him; and he sat down, and taught them. <sup>3</sup>And the scribes and Pharisees brought unto him a woman taken in adultery; and when they had set her in the midst, <sup>4</sup>They say unto him, Master, this woman was taken in adultery, in the very act. <sup>5</sup>Now Moses in the law commanded us, that such should be stoned: but what sayest thou? <sup>6</sup>This they said, tempting him, that they might have to accuse him. But Jesus stooped down, and with his finger wrote on the ground, as though he heard them not. <sup>7</sup>So when they continued asking him, he lifted up himself, and said unto them, He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her. <sup>8</sup>And again he stooped down, and wrote on the ground. <sup>9</sup>And they which heard it, being convicted by their own conscience, went out one by one, beginning at the eldest, even unto the last: and Jesus was left alone, and the woman standing in the midst. <sup>10</sup>When Jesus had lifted up himself, and saw none but the woman, he said unto her, Woman, where are those thine accusers? hath no man condemned thee? <sup>11</sup>She said, No man, Lord. And Jesus said unto her, Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more.

HYMN LBW 306

*Chief of Sinners though I Be*

## SERMON

In the name of the Father and of the † Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

⁹But when they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the eldest, and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. (John 8:9, RSV)

Good for the eldest! One by one, the accusers examined their own hearts and their own deeds, turned and walked away. And they were led in this humility by a man of my own generation. Perhaps that is because with the accumulation of years, there also comes increasing awareness of how flawed our own lives have been and how, in the end, we all depend upon the mercy of God if we are going to have any hope for eternity. So an old man takes the first step. He drops his stone, walks away, and leaves the woman with Jesus. They all walk away, until at last, it is simply Jesus and the woman left.

She is no pretend sinner, but the real thing. She is not the victim of false accusation. No, as the text says, she was “caught in adultery.” It was no lightweight sin, but outright disobedience to the will of God. The commandment against adultery is placed right next to the commandment against murder, because they are both such profound ways of hurting someone. Indeed, there is not a whole difference between taking someone’s life and breaking that one’s heart. And if men and women are going to love each other with their whole hearts, holding nothing back, but entirely entrusting their lives into the hands of their beloved, then the law against adultery must be serious. Otherwise, how can anyone risk so much? Love becomes cautious, self-protective. How can it be rational, for example, to love with abandon in an age of no fault divorce? When adultery is no longer reckoned a terrible sin, then profound love threatens to evaporate.

But Israel reckoned adultery a terrible sin. There was no confusion about that. The Sixth Commandment is clear in its prohibition: Thou shalt not commit adultery. And the law of Moses is clear in the specified punishment: death:

If a man is found lying with the wife of another man, both of them shall die, the man who lay with the woman, and the woman; so you shall purge the evil from Israel.  
(Deuteronomy 22:22, RSV)

I do not know where the adulterous man is in this story. Perhaps he has already been put to death before he had a chance for Jesus to save him as he saved this woman.

## **A CLEVER TRAP**

We do not really know the motivation of the scribes and Pharisees who brought this woman to Jesus. Maybe their question is earnest and innocent. But if they meant mischief to Jesus by their question, they have indeed set a clever trap for him. There seems no way forward for him. It looks inevitable that either Jesus is going to deny the law of Moses or he is going to turn away from his sweet preaching of forgiveness. If his opponents meant him harm, they probably stand there quite satisfied with themselves that they have Jesus trapped.

Well, if they did mean Jesus ill by their question, it turned out to be with them as the Psalmist of old had prayed:

<sup>9</sup>Keep me from the trap which they have laid for me, and from the snares of evildoers! <sup>10</sup>Let the wicked together fall into their own nets, while I escape. (Psalm 141:9-10, RSV)

It was not Jesus who suffered a blow in this story, but those who had brought the woman to him. They had probably entered this conversation feeling pretty good about themselves. But they leave it in public acknowledgment that they too have sinned—indeed have sinned so grievously that they cannot no longer bring themselves to condemn the woman caught in adultery.

## **ONE MAN COULD HAVE THROWN THE STONE**

So, the scribes and Pharisees turn and walk away, beginning with the eldest. But one man remain, right? There is one man left who qualifies to condemn the woman. That is Jesus himself. Jesus had laid down a high standard for those who condemned the woman:

<sup>7</sup>So when they continued asking him, he lifted up himself, and said unto them, He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her. (John 8:7, KJV)

This standard was so high that in all honesty it excluded everyone *except* for the preacher himself. Jesus was the only one there who was without sin. But Jesus is the one who does not condemn the woman. It is in this story exactly as those beloved verses from John 3 said:

<sup>16</sup>For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. <sup>17</sup>For God sent *not* his Son

into the world *to condemn* the world; but that the world through him might be saved. (John 3:16-17, KJV)

## LUTHER

To enjoy this wonderful story, let's listen to the teaching of Martin Luther. I think he helps to sort some things out for us.

First, Luther approaches this story by way of his “two kingdom doctrine.” According to that doctrine, God rules his creation in two different ways. They are called the “kingdom of the left hand,” which is the official law of the land, and the “kingdom of the right hand,” which is the preaching of the gospel and of forgiveness. But it is crucial to see that for Luther *both* kingdoms are the true word and will of God. Indeed, Luther feels that the golden art of preaching and government is that the two kingdoms should not be confused and that neither kingdom should pretend to invalidate the other.

So, Luther begins his discussion of the woman caught in adultery by saying that it was improper for the scribes and Pharisees to have brought the woman to Jesus in the first place because Jesus is not a judge, magistrate, or ruler. Those officials are the appointed guardians of the law of the land—a law that includes death as punishment for adultery. And it is their duty to administer justice, not the duty of Jesus. Jesus is not interfering with the duty of legislators, judges, or rulers. He is not saying that the law against adultery is wrong. That law is the law of the land and reflects the true will of God, and so Luther thinks the scribes and Pharisees had no business bringing the woman to Jesus in the first place.

But they did. And in the process, they learned something important about the kingdom of the gospel: they learned that in that kingdom, *all* citizens are sinners, and therefore none of them is qualified to condemn anyone else. So, Luther imagines Jesus saying something like this to the scribes and Pharisees:

Therefore since you will not rest until you have heard the judgment of My kingdom, I declare that this woman is truly an adulteress. In My kingdom, however, there are many more like her.”

How many more? All are like her. And if any of them are to be forgiven, this woman must be forgiven too.

Things are quite otherwise in the left hand kingdom. There differences among people must be acknowledged. There it is relevant that one person is, say, an adulterer while another is not. Luther is rather shocking in how he talks about this left hand kingdom:

In Moses' sphere and in his office the story would have been different. There judgment is relevant because of the office. There the judge may be guilty of the same sin, and it does not affect or alter the case. The ordinances, the law, the office, the sword, the gallows, and the wheel are not ours or any man's; they are our Lord God's. The sword, fire, water, and other methods of punishment are God's; He ordered them and wants them used. It is He Himself who bums, hangs, and beheads the evildoers. Even if you—a prince, a burgomaster, or a judge—are a scoundrel and a knave, I must still remember that it was God who put the sword of justice into your hand. If I were invested with such an office and were a rogue, I would be constrained to say: "Although I deserve to be beheaded first, it is still my duty to pass sentence regardless of circumstances."

Think about the crucifixion of our Lord, for example. Two thieves die there along with Jesus. But Jesus says not a word against the condemnation of these two thieves. They are dying a gruesome death, but they are dying according to the law of the land, and Jesus raises no protest.

Ahh, but he does something better than protest. He promises forgiveness to the repentant thief. And that is the law of Christ's kingdom: Jesus does not come to condemn, but to forgive and to further life. Listen, then, to Luther's beautiful discussion of that:

This is the course of events in Christ's kingdom. When you enter there, you and I are the same, even though we may be unequal in the world. For instance, I may be an adulterer, a thief, etc., and you are not. Yet this makes no difference; for in myself I detect far greater defects, which distress me so much that I do not know where to turn. The rule in Christ's kingdom reads: "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone." Therefore, dear fellows, let the stones lie. I will not pick up any either. Let them lie, and do not throw at one another. Drop the stones, and say: "Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors" (Matt. 6:12). They should say: "We have sinned; pray God for me." (Luther)

Let the stones lie, says Luther. That is the way of the kingdom of Christ. He comes that this adulterous woman might have life, aye, might have it abundantly, and so he releases her with his precious saying:

Woman, where are those thine accusers? hath no man condemned thee? <sup>11</sup>She said, No man, Lord. And Jesus said unto her, Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more.

This too is part of life, that we should go and sin no more. Such is the kingdom of Christ: It is a kingdom of sorrow for sin, forgiveness, and the call to sin no more.

In Christ's kingdom, if this woman must die, then we all must die. If this woman must fall, then we all must fall. But Jesus did not come that we should fall, but rather that we should turn and live, through him to whom belongs the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.