

WHO CONDEMNNS YOU?

Great Questions (Part 2)

Text: John 8:1-11

I

Few influences have the power to shape our lives like a great question. We might forget the content of a movie, sermon, or book. We may ignore someone's opinion or advice. We can manage to shut-out constructive criticism or by-pass common wisdom. But a well-aimed question affects us differently. It has this way of getting under our skin and staying with us. It becomes a seed that starts growing and, over time, can alter our life.

I think this is why, when Jesus really wanted to dig deep into the soil of someone's soul, he didn't give them a to-do list or roll out a theological lecture; instead, he posed a powerful question. We saw that in the episode from Christ's life we studied last week. Jesus asks James and John: "What do you really want?" It's the kind of question that makes you stop in your tracks and really think. What is it that I really desire? Is it the want or wish-list that immediately comes to mind, that occupies my thinking much of the time? Or is there a deeper desire in me that maybe I've buried or somehow forgot – something that it takes God to address?

Today we're going to look at another one of the Great Questions asked by Jesus. The scene unfolds in John chapter 8 but a crucial bit of context is supplied in John 7. Jesus had spent the day before teaching in the courtyard next to Jerusalem's great Temple. He had thrown the Pharisees and other religious leaders into a hissy-fit by claiming that he had come as the answer to the deepest wants of humanity. He'd said, in effect, "**Come to me** and I will fill up to overflowing with the life and love of God" (John 7:37-38).

What made matters worse from the religious leaders' point of view was that people were starting to believe him. Jesus had done these miraculous acts of healing. He spoke with a clarity and authority greater than they'd heard from even their most educated leaders. There was a love and power in the person of Jesus that was making even non-religious people thirsty to get close to him. People were starting to say, this man is "**the prophet**" the Scriptures promised would come ahead of the Messiah. And others had already made the leap. "No, **he is the Christ** himself." Even Nicodemus, one of the most respected of the Jewish ruling council, is beginning to believe this.

II

John chapter 8 opens up by telling us that at the end of that day, Jesus left the city and went across the valley to spend the night in one of the villages on the hillside known as

the Mount of Olives. **“At dawn,”** however, **“he appeared again in the temple courts, where all the people gathered around him, and he sat down to teach them.”** It is here that the stakes get even higher and the conflict between Jesus and the teachers threatened by him gets even hotter and suddenly draws another player into the drama. The Bible says that **“the teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery [and] made her stand before the group.”**

Now, we don't know this woman's back story. I suppose it's possible that there were extenuating circumstances that would paint her in a charitable light. Maybe she'd been subject to a lifetime of abuse and abandonment and had become a tramp out of desperation. In a previous church I served, there was a woman like this. Her life story would make your heart-break. None of the others who sang alongside of her in the choir knew that there were nights when she travelled to another city and sold her body on the streets, just to feed herself and take care of her child. Was this woman the Pharisees brought in someone like that? Or was she one of those far more common lonely or insecure people, the ones who find comfort in the advances of a married person or who step out on their own marriage, failing to count the cost till the damage is done? Or was she one of those people who no longer even see moral boundary lines when it comes to sex – jumping in and out of bed with various partners, each time leaving behind something of their soul?

We don't know. The Bible doesn't say. But whatever the back story, this much is clear. This woman had been found out. She had been dragged into the center of the lobby of the Church, the courtyard of the Temple. She now stood trembling in shame before all those eyes that looked at her with disgust. She listened as the most powerful people in the community accused and condemned her for what she had done, what she *knew* she *had* done. **“Teacher,”** the Pharisees said to the famous rabbi standing there, **“this woman was caught in the act of adultery. In the Law, Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now, what do you say?”**

III

I remarked last week that there are all kinds of questions in life. There are stupid questions, serious questions, perennial questions, and good questions. This thing the Pharisees ask, falls into the category of “trick questions.” Why is that? Well, for one thing, we know the religious leaders aren't asking it because they really think they need Jesus' help in answering it. They didn't respect the opinion of Jesus. They didn't need him in order to exact the punishment specified in the Mosaic law – although, if you'll read Deuteronomy 22, you'll see the law was actually a lot more discerning and even-handed than the Pharisees here portray. They don't really care about seeing the “right thing” done. If they had been, then the man who had been tangoing with this woman would certainly have been dragged into the judgment circle too. Mosaic law required that.

The point is, these religious leaders aren't actually in the discernment and justice business at all; they're in the condemnation business. They are those sorts of people maybe we've met (and maybe we've sometimes been) who are very expert at grading the seriousness of sin. They put at the top of the Serious Sin list those issues with which they don't particularly struggle or with which they've managed to hide their struggle – say, sexual sins or theft. They have managed to put at the bottom of the list those things with which they regularly struggle and lose – like pride, envy, gossip, anger, or apathy toward the poor. This approach, they find, leaves them feeling quietly superior to others or in a position openly condemn.

That is, until they meet Jesus. Jesus, you see, takes all of this stuff seriously. He knows all the different sorts of ways our heart and character gets disfigured. He knows the rackets we have for hiding this from ourselves or others. He is actually hardest on those of us who don't admit this or who play the superiority and condemnation game. This is why he was so hard on the Pharisees. And this is why they had to get rid of him. They had already decided that this woman was condemnable and they had figured out how they could use her to get Jesus condemned too.

You see, If Jesus counseled mercy toward the woman, then he would be publicly contradicting Moses, the greatest of the ancient law-givers. On the other hand, if Jesus counseled stoning her, then he would lose favor with the common people who saw him as a welcome contrast to the harshness of their religious leaders. In other words, there was no apparent answer Jesus could give to their question and not look bad. John 8:6 confirms this by saying: **“They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing [Jesus].”**

IV

So what DID Jesus say? The scriptures declare that **“Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger.”** What he wrote that day is one of the perennial questions for people who study this passage. I've got my own theory¹ on this and have included it in the notes I'll supply with the written manuscript of this message. What seems more important is what we know for certain. **“When they kept on questioning him,”** the Bible says, Jesus **“straightened up and said to them, ‘If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her.’ At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first.”**

In a recent Lenten devotion, Ruth Haley Barton described a passage in Kathleen Norris' book *Amazing Grace*, in which the author tells the story of working at a parochial school, teaching children how to write poetry using the psalms as a model. One little boy penned a poem entitled "The Monster Who Was Sorry." He began by admitting that he hates it when his father yells at him. His response (in the poem) is to throw his

sister down the stairs, and then to wreck his room, and finally to wreck the whole town. The poem concludes: "Then I sit in my messy house and say to myself, 'I shouldn't have done all that.'"

This story, I think, is a really instructive one, especially when coupled with the words of Jesus here. Like the little boy in Kathleen Norris' book, a lot of us have grown up in an environment where someone – or maybe many someones -- have been yelling at us with a voice of condemnation. Author Winn Collier suggests that, if you think about it, much of "our world runs on condemnation. Parents discover their kids' behavior can often be modified with the threat (implicit or not) of Mom or Dad's emotional withdrawal and disapproval. Our culture's consumerist enterprise pushes its agenda on us with a steady stream of advertised condemnations, judging our [overly] large or skinny or flat or pimply body, judging our old car, judging our outdated clothes, judging our cheap vacation. It's sad that the church [sometimes] chimes in as well: 'Do more. Be more. God sees you – aren't you ashamed of yourself?' One wonders if our whole world would gulp and misfire and grind to a knocking halt if it ever ran out of the fuel condemnation provides."²

The cumulative effect of these demands and judgments break us down till we become lawless like the adulterous woman or law-bangers like the Pharisees. In fits of passion or false piety, we throw other people down the stairs. We wreak havoc on the room of our own heart or home. We may even send out shockwaves from our broken character that do damage in the town around us. Sometimes we are so embedded in this way of being and coping that we don't see what we are doing to others and ourselves. We're mostly conscious of how other people are blowing it and how much condemnation they deserve for their bad acting.

V

But, then one day, God finds us and brings us to our senses. Like the child in the story, and more often like "**the older ones**" in the Temple crowd, wisdom and humility settle upon us. We look around our own messy house and suddenly realize: "I am not without sin. Oh, I shouldn't have done all that. I am such a monster." The grip we've had on the stones we've been using to pelt others changes and now we start pounding ourselves. But this doesn't fix things.

Whether they come from outside of us or from inside of us, what we need to understand, writes Collier, is that "these shrill, incessant voices heaping heavy loads of condemnation on us are liars. God never piles on shame. God never assaults our personhood. He never speaks with hopelessness or despair. God will correct and instruct. God will tell us the truth, even if it hurts. God works to get our attention and remind us of our true, powerful, beautiful name. But God never heaps condemnation on us. That is the devil's work... This is how condemnation gains a foothold with us: it speaks a half-truth."³ It makes us aware of part of our condition. It tells us that we are

sinful, broken creatures, and this is true. But it leaves us believing that there is no way out of our mess, save by hating ourselves more or somehow whipping ourselves into perfect and worthy shape -- a kind of penance that ultimately fails.

What we must come to see if we are to get well is that our sin is not the whole of our condition. It's just half of the truth. The other half is that we have a Savior whose grace is sufficient for all our needs. He is not surprised by our wretched failures or repulsed by our inability to get out of the mess on our own. Jesus did not come to earth in order to whip us into shape and then forgive us. He came to forgive us and then fill us with the loving Spirit of God that enables us to get up and start again.

It has been said that repentance is not so much looking at the past and saying, "I'm so sorry," as it is looking at the future Christ makes possible and saying: "Wow! Can it really be?" Yes, it can be. That's why the story in John 8 ends the way it does. By now, the courtyard of the Temple was quiet. **"Only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. Jesus straightened up [a second time] and asked her, 'Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?' 'No one, sir,' she said. 'Neither do I condemn you,' Jesus declared. 'Go now and leave your life of sin.'"**

"Who condemns you?" Jesus asks you today. It's a Great Question. Who are the voices that have lied to you, telling you that you are all mess with no real hope, save how you can punish or perfect yourself? That's just the Thief talking, "Not I," says Jesus. "For I have come that you might have life and have it to the full" (John 10:10).

During Benediction

³⁴ Who would dare even to point a finger?

The One who died for us—who was raised to life for us!—is in the presence of God at this very moment sticking up for us.

³⁵ Do you think anyone is going to be able to drive a wedge between us and Christ's love for us? There is no way! Not trouble, not hard times, not hatred, not hunger, not homelessness, not bullying threats, not backstabbing, not even the worst sins listed in Scripture."

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³¹ So, what do you think? With God on our side like this, how can we lose? ³² If God didn't hesitate to put everything on the line for us, embracing our condition and exposing himself to the worst by sending his own Son, is there anything else he wouldn't gladly and freely do for us? ³³ And who would dare tangle with God by messing with one of God's chosen? ³⁴ Who would dare even to point a finger? The One who died for us—who was raised to life for us!—is in the presence of God at this very moment sticking up for us. ³⁵ Do you think anyone is going to be able to drive a wedge between us and Christ's love for us? There is no way! Not trouble, not hard times, not hatred, not hunger, not homelessness, not bullying threats, not backstabbing, not even the worst sins listed in Scripture. Romans 8:31-35 (MSG)

1. Do you identify more closely with the woman caught in adultery or with those who caught her in this sin? In what way?
2. Where and how in your life have you experienced condemnation? What have been the effects of that?
3. What is the relationship you see between Jesus' statement "Neither do I condemn you" and "Go and leave your life of sin?"
4. Can you see any relationship between the woman caught in adultery and the Pharisees who sought to condemn her AND the younger son and elder brother in the parable Jesus tells in Luke 15? How so?
5. What other thoughts, feelings, or questions does this topic raise for you?

¹ Some scholars suggest that Jesus may have written the words of Exodus 23:1: "Do not be a malicious witness." Others venture that he was simply tracing idly in the dust while preparing to respond as he does in verse 7. I have another theory. There is one other occasion in the Bible when the finger of God writes a message intended to warn human beings of their arrogance and presumption. Daniel 5 records a scene in the grand ballroom of Babylon when King Belshazzar and his nobles were feasting in exultation at their power and righteousness, apparently oblivious to the fact that the Medo-Persian armies were encamped around Babylon about to turn the course of history. It did not have to be this way. God had shown enormous patience and kindness to the leaders of Babylon. He had given them repeated signs of his authority, multiple opportunities to repent, and a cascade of graces designed to lead them into a true relationship with him. As he did with the Israelites also, God had even sent prophets (like Daniel) to call them to himself. Like the religious leaders we meet in John 8, however, King Belshazzar and his court were too drunk on their own authority and too sure of their own position to respond to these opportunities. And so, in the midst of their revelry, the hand of God came and wrote a simple message on the wall of the room where they were banqueting. The message came in the form of four Aramaic words: "Mene, mene, tekel, parsin." The prophet Daniel translated the words as follows: "This is what these words mean: *Mene*: God has numbered the days of your reign and brought it to an end. *Tekel*: You have been weighed on the scales and found wanting. *Peres*: Your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians" (Daniel 5:26-28). As history records it, "that very night Belshazzar, king of the Babylonians, was slain, and Darius the Mede took over the kingdom" (Daniel 5:30-31). Could these have been the words that the Divine Hand made flesh (John 1:14) wrote upon the ground in Jerusalem that day? Did he simply write: "Mene, mene, tekel, parsin"? This side of eternity, we can't know. But, considering (1) the similarity between the pattern of the religious leaders of Israel and the political leaders of Babylon and (2) the parallel stories of God's hand writing briefly but potently in each case, this message would have been very eerily fitting.

² Winn Collier, *Holy Curiosity*, p.25.

³ Collier, p.33.