

Come and See: Asking Jesus in John, Pt. 1
Neither Do I Condemn You
John 8: 2-11

**First Presbyterian Church
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I've been transfixed by this 2011 painting from Russian painter Andrei Mironov. It conveys to me the heart of our story from John 8. This picture works with both the beginning and the end of the event.

Early one morning while Jesus was teaching, the religious leaders threw a woman down before him. “She has been caught betraying her husband. The law says to stone her. What do you say?” That’s the *ask* of Jesus in this passage. The law says this. We demand that you say whether or not you will uphold the law.

If we locate Mironov’s painting at the start of this narrative, his art forces us to feel the desperation, the urgency and the sense of a fate already sealed. Look at the eyes of this woman as if she had just landed there. She expects condemnation. She is resigned that this is the end. She tries to look far away to happier times. The woman lies at Christ’s feet, the posture of a supplicant. Her head rests on one foot. Warm skin is a respite from the cold hard pavement. Jesus does not recoil at the feel of her hair, her forehead against him. Amidst the clamor, the feet of Jesus are a moment’s shelter before the stones bombard her.

We are not strangers to being caught in the act. From childhood we know the awful feeling of being found out. The coins stolen from my mother’s purse clanked unmistakably as I walked up the stairs toward her. The forbidden ice cream spilled all over the floor as if in collusion with my parents. I could never get it cleaned up before they came into the kitchen. And of course the door always squeaked the loudest when I tried to sneak back into the house after midnight.

To be caught is to be exposed with no possibility for escape or denial. The bottom falls out. There is a hollow feeling in the stomach. Our breath catches and our skin prickles. Faces flush. The mind cries out, “Oh no!” Fear and shame turn to anger and then futile attempts to blame others, but ultimately it’s all useless. We are nailed.

It’s not only as kids that we have been caught. Who can endure the accusations that name us with such devastating precision? Have you ever heard these words:

- You promised me that you quit, but I know you were drinking last night.
- This paper is clearly not your own writing; I found these exact sentences by Googling them.
- He’s not even officially divorced yet, but she sees him anyway!
- You’re not listening to me; I can see you thinking of something else.
- You knew all along that this wasn’t quality work; you were just trying to fake it.

And if the accusations of others weren’t enough, there are the accusations inside our own heads.

- I do not deserve any thing more than this.
- Mommy left because of me.
- This was done to me because secretly I wanted it.
- Can’t you do anything right?
- If you ever tell anyone, he’ll kill you.
- You’re so ugly, no one will ever want you.
- How can you be so dumb? Are you just plain stupid?

The voices replay in our hearts and minds, often when we are not even conscious of them. And we live out the condemnations with an exacting, destructive obedience. So we find ourselves quite often in the ring of accusation, surrounded by those who are ready to throw their stones.

The woman in John 8 was trapped in such a circle. She was without excuse, literally caught in the act of adultery. But she is not beyond understanding. Most people who get caught up in affairs don’t go into them seeking to blow up their marriages, damage their children, wreck their finances and make a mess of their futures. We enter affairs, like we enter most sins, seeking something we’re

missing. We're looking for life, but in the wrong place. We can all relate to her, if not to the exact degree, then at least in spirit. We go looking for something to fill a need or satisfy a desire, and we get caught, and we are exposed, receiving the accusations we have so justly brought on ourselves. It's just the worst.



So they had brought this woman to Jesus. Thrown her down at his feet, then formed a circle of accusations around both the woman and Jesus. “Teacher, this woman has been caught. The law says stone her. What do you say? Whose side are you on?” Very clever. If he let her go, they’d have him as a law-breaker. If he answered, “She should be stoned,” his talk of a merciful

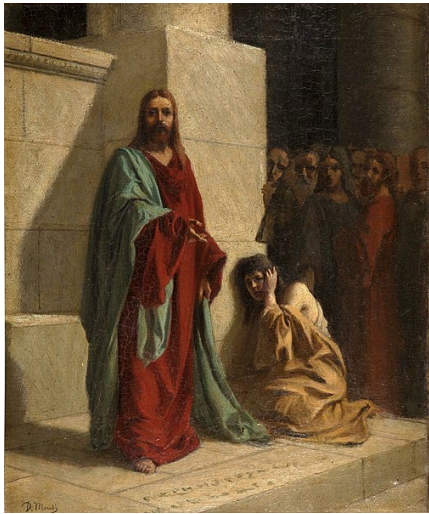
heavenly Father would be worthless. They thought they had him. The intensity of their self-righteousness bore down upon him. They wanted blood.

Jesus knelt down and wrote with his finger in the dirt. Now the story never tells us what Jesus wrote when he bent down to the ground. This enigmatic action has kept readers speculating for years. Perhaps Jesus was writing Bible verses related to the incident—verses that indicate both the man as well as the woman were subject to judgment. The offending man’s absence from these accusers was a notable breach of the law. Perhaps Jesus was writing the sins and the names of those who accused the woman. Perhaps he scribbled a message of hope to her, or maybe he was just doodling. We don’t know what he wrote, but we do know that his action rearranged the very energy of the moment.

In those moments before the angry mob, there were waves of urgent demanding that Jesus decide quickly. A lesser person could easily have been swept up in the intensity. But by writing on the ground, Jesus derailed the train of accusation. He shifted the focus from the woman to himself.

Commentator Edward Klink makes a beautiful connection here.¹ He says the key to this moment is in the description of what Jesus did. He wrote on the ground with his *finger*. Exodus 31: 18 declares that the LORD gave to Moses “the two tablets of the testimony, tablets of stone, written with the *finger of God*.” In Deuteronomy 9:10 Moses reminded the people how he had gone up on the

mountain to receive the tablets of stone, the tablets of the covenant, which had been written by the finger of God. The Pharisees challenged Jesus to interpret the law correctly. Jesus knelt down and wrote with his finger on the ground, before he said anything. Symbolically, Jesus was declaring that he himself is the author of the law. His finger is the very finger of God. What he speaks will be the author's intent. Jesus' interpretation will be the heart of God enshrined inside the law.



Having slowed down the self-righteous urgency of a mob, Jesus stood up and rendered his verdict. I think his words came out deliberately, calmly, and with absolute *authority*, the words of the author of the law. "The one among you who is without sin, go ahead and be the first to throw a stone at her." His words must have hung in the air for quite a while. The whole situation was turned upside down. Yes, throw a stone at one justly accused. Go ahead. But let the first rock be hurled by the one among you who has no sin. Let that man step forward

Once more Jesus knelt and wrote on the ground. Once more he assumed the authority of the God who wrote the law on stone with his finger. Jesus forced them to reflect. They would now have to make a judgement about themselves, before judging either Jesus or the woman. The one without any sin was free to sling the rock. How powerful must Jesus' presence have been! His words and actions demanded that the accusers look inward and acknowledge their sin. Think of what he did: *He delivered them from evil*. He saved them from the hell of thinking they had no sin, from the evil of self-righteousness. And the violence that often follows. He put them back into the position of being able to receive grace. He broke the spell of anger, and so made room for compassion. One by one, they dropped their stones and went away.



Now let's return to Mironov's painting and consider it as a scene from the end of this story. Look again at her eyes. She is stunned. Exhausted. Relieved. No stones were thrown. Only Jesus is left. She feels his foot under her head. All her world is the beauty of that road worn foot. She loves him utterly. He is her peace.

Jesus asked the woman, “Where are you accusers? Has no one condemned you?” She replied, “No one, Lord.” Then Jesus said these most precious words, “Neither do I condemn you. Go, and from now on, sin no more.”

Jesus let her know that the only voice she needed to listen to was the voice of the sinless one, God come in the flesh. The voice of the one who wrote the law with his own finger. And his voice did not ring out in condemnation but in forgiveness. There was no excuse for her sin; it remained wrong and off limits. She could never go back to it. But the cycle of shame and judgment was broken.

Neither do I condemn you. Only those who drop the stones are in position to hear these gracious words. Those who drop the stones must give up self-justification and throw themselves on the mercy of the one true judge. It’s frightening at first to drop all the charges we have leveled against everyone and to ask, “Lord, search *me*, and see if there be any wicked way in *me*, then lead me in the way everlasting” (Ps. 139). But the witness of this story and of countless millions is that the judge is our redeemer. Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more.

Where do you need to hear those words? As you spoke to the woman then, Lord Jesus, so speak to me now. I am caught. I admit it. As Psalm 130 says, “If you O LORD, should mark iniquities, who could stand? But with you there is plenteous redemption.” So, Jesus, say your words to me, “Neither do I condemn you.”

Today there will be no more excuses. No more turning the shame of owning these failures into blame of others. No more rocks ready to be thrown at them or ourselves. Today we admit our sins and the shame that comes from them. We step into the circle of accusation and admit that we deserve to be there. We deny nothing. We throw ourselves upon the mercy of Jesus. We rest our heads on his feet.

And then we discover that what Jesus did then he still does now. He stood in the ring of condemnation with the woman caught. He stands with us now. He takes our shame as his own. He takes our sin off our backs and off our hearts and puts it on his cross. He turns the circle of shame into a circle of grace. As Paul wrote, “He made him sin who knew no sin so that we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5: 21). The sin is not overlooked. He takes the condemnation as his own, into his own flesh. Then he is just when he sets us free with these priceless words, “Neither do I condemn you. Sin no more, go in peace.”

Jesus, this woman, this man, was caught. The law demands condemnation. What do you say? The God who wrote the law with his divine finger, now writes with a human finger. And Jesus writes through his servant Paul “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus!” (Rom. 8: 1). I have made your condemnation my own. For you there is no condemnation! From you there is to be no condemnation. Sin no more. Go in peace.

¹ Edward Klink, *John: Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2016), pp. 393-5.

Paintings

Andrei Mironov “Christ and the Sinful Woman,” Russian, 2011.

Yongsung Kim, “Forgive,” USA, 2010.

Domenico Morelli, “Christ and the Adulterous Woman,” Spain 1869.