



When God Is in the Room

TEXT
John 8:1–11

March 11, 2018 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

When I traveled in Israel, one of the things that struck me is how in so many places there are so many stones. They are everywhere. It caused me to remember the Jewish practice of gathering stones for altars, as a way to mark a spot where God did something — a way to remind the people that God had made a difference in this spot. But the stones are risky.

This remarkable moment in the ministry of Jesus was almost lost to the church. The early manuscripts of John's gospel did not include this story. As copies were made, over time, scribes kept inserting this story in various places in the gospel.¹ We only know about it because some scribes were persistent in passing it on to us.

It's not an easy story to read. It's hard in part because we hold some sensitivities that most folks in the days of Jesus would not have worried about as deeply. This woman, who is forced to stand before Jesus and the crowds and the Pharisees and scribes, stands accused as an adulteress, caught in the very act. I'm glad we don't know more details than that. Of course, if

we were to know more details, that might mean we would know the man she was with. He's not forced to stand before the community. He's invisible.

It's hard because in this pursuit of righteousness, we see the unrighteousness of misogyny. It's uncomfortable.

It's also hard to read because later the crowds are quick to inform Pilate that the Romans must crucify Jesus, because Jews are not allowed to put anyone to death. And yet, here, they are eager to stone her. It's hard to read.

But another reason this story is hard to read is because it makes it so clear that following Jesus requires courage.

They came to Jesus. I'm not sure why they came. It says they wanted to test him. Folks tested Jesus often. Perhaps they were trying to create some distance between the teaching of Jesus and the teaching of Moses. The teaching of Moses defined the truth. That's how they knew what was right and holy — follow the teaching of Moses.

The law of Moses requires such a woman be put to death, they said. It's recorded both in Deuteronomy² and Leviticus. In case you haven't read Leviticus this week, it is possible to still have a good week, even if you

don't read Leviticus. But if you *do* read it, you will note it says in both Leviticus and Deuteronomy that she should be stoned for committing adultery. What the scribes forgot to mention is that it also states that the man with whom she committed this sin, the man who was not dragged to the temple grounds, the man who, if she was caught in the very act, had to be present; the law says that man should be stoned to death as well. How do you suppose the religious leaders missed that? Well, you know how. There is a long history where it is easier to punish women than to punish men. It is easier, even expected, that a woman must be punished; but the man, he gets a pass. It makes it hard to read, if you ask me.

It reveals their very pursuit of righteousness reveals their own unrighteousness. It makes me cautious. Because when I encounter unrighteousness, when I encounter injustice, when I encounter evil, I react much as they do. You probably do too.

Thirty years ago, Harrison Ford starred in the movie *Witness*. Ford plays John Book, a police officer who is undercover in an Amish community. He adopts their clothing, their mode of transportation and their work

ethic, but not their pacifism. In one scene, a group of the Amish men are riding their horse-drawn buggies into town. Some local ruffians begin to harass them, belittling them and laughing because the Amish won't fight back.

John Book steps out of a buggy; he's wearing the clothes, but he's not Amish. He approaches the bully and, to the shock of everyone around, throws a punch and breaks the guy's nose. When that happened, everyone in the theater cheered.

When we see unrighteousness, we want things to be made right, to settle the score.

Bashar Al Assad is bombing his own people. Children are living every moment in fear. It's wrong. And something should be done.

Nicolas Cruz shoots randomly in Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School and it is wrong, and something should be done.

Every day there are women and children in our city who must reach out to Rose Brooks or Sunflower House or the Children's Place because home is where they find abuse or neglect. It is wrong, and something should be done.

When we see unrighteousness, we want it to be made right.

There was a practice in Judaism to deal with unrighteousness by expunging it from the righteous. Send them out of the village. Or punish them with death. When evil is discovered, you separate the righteous from the unrighteous.

It is our way in America as well. We separate ourselves from

the unrighteous. We incarcerate more people than any other nation. It is our way to expel unrighteousness from the righteous. I'm not sure how well that is working, but it is our way.

Jesus, the law of Moses demands that she be put to death. What do you say, Jesus?

There is a mystery in this text. Jesus kneels down and draws in the dust. Everyone wants to know what he draws. Does he draw a picture? Does he write a word? Does he draw a line? It says he does it twice; it must be important. What's he doing in the dust? We aren't told what he wrote. We are left to wonder.

But then Jesus says, *You who are without sin, you stone this woman.* And then from the most surprising place we find courage shows up.

They couldn't do it. One by one they dropped their rocks, leaving them there on the ground like an unorganized altar marking the spot where God had changed them. They would not stone this woman. The law required it, but they couldn't do it. It wasn't in them.

I say it's courageous because they are leaving behind more than the stones in their hands; they are leaving behind yesterday's definition of righteousness. They are reworking their own understanding of righteousness and unrighteousness.

Like newborns, they are pushed into a new day — a day when not only this woman, but maybe a day when it is no longer okay to stone *any* woman. We just don't do that anymore.

Righteousness is a funny thing. We can so easily find those who are less righteous than we are. It's easy. You know who they are. We all have our list. But Jesus reminds the righteous that we must make our case to God. Jesus reminds the righteous that God is in the room, and the context changes. In the presence of God, our distinctions between the righteous and the unrighteous are not as dramatic as we think.

He draws in the dust. I wish we were told what he draws. But maybe it wasn't that he drew something in the dust. Maybe he's just getting his hands in the dust, reminding us all that all of us are dust. And in the presence of God, all of us are in need of grace.

This is what humbles me in this story. When we understand that God is in the room, that we live every moment in the presence of God, then our response to unrighteousness can't be one of separating the righteous from the unrighteous — because as soon as we draw that line, Jesus will be on the other side of the line.

And I am inspired by the courage of these religious leaders, who came to the moment wrapped in their understanding of what was right, of how we do things, of the way life should be ... and they leave this moment awkwardly toddling into a new day.

So, do you think it is possible for God to do something like that again, maybe among us? Do you think God is trying to show us some of the failed assumptions of our way of life? We are pretty

set in our ways of how things must be done.

We are pretty entrenched in our ways with race. Even when our news feeds bring us images of oppression and images of violence, we can easily feel like the ways of our own Moses determines the present. Can there be a new day?

We are pretty entrenched with gun violence. Oh, the overall numbers of gun deaths are down, but just because they are better than the worst doesn't give us much to boast about. We argue about our forefathers' understanding of freedom, but it's killing us. Is it possible to walk into a new day?

We have been that way with women. The past couple of years have indicted the "good old boy" ways — our own laws of Moses — the way things are done. I have been shaken, not by the names in the news, but by the names of so many women I know and love who have said "me too." I have been shaken in learning how long they have been silent, convinced that there was no ear to hear.

It is possible to toddle into a new day and leave the stones of patriarchal privilege behind? In a not-so-long-ago yesterday, it was just boys being boys; it was just boy talk; it was "I didn't mean anything."

That was the way of our own laws of Moses: We justified belittling speech and dehumanizing taunts — and sometimes even assault. But today there is not a man of conscience who is not paying attention to his own power and questioning his own

soul and not seeking a new way of being.

Maybe, and it's too early to tell, but maybe there is a new day coming when our daughters can grow up in a world of respect that our mothers could only imagine.

They brought her to Jesus. She has done something wrong. No argument. *We need to punish her*; they said.

Maybe so, Jesus said. *But you make your case to God first, not to each other. You make your case to God and then decide. If you are without sin, go ahead.*

They couldn't do it. Maybe they would have yesterday. Maybe there was a yesterday they did; but not today. It's a new day because they remembered that every moment is lived in the presence of God.

God is always in the room. Remember that, and it's hard to make the case of how righteous we are. But ironically, remembering that God is in the room is the best chance we have of being a little more righteous than we were yesterday.

So, do you think that God could do this again, maybe among us?

I think so, but it will take courage.

¹Francis J. Moloney, SDB, *The Gospel of John Sacra Pagina* (1998), p. 259

²Deuteronomy 22:22–24 and Leviticus 20:10

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.