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The Words He Wrote in the Dust **John 8: 1-11**

A pericope is not some strange form of butterbean engineered at Clemson or Auburn. A pericope is a literary fragment, usually a short story that often floats around like a plastic bead in a windstorm until someone plucks it out of the air and places it within their narrative. What we have this morning before us is a floating pericope. It floated in and out of Gospels for about six hundred years, floating into the Gospel of Luke as often as it floated into John, where it finally landed for good about A.D. 900. This pericope was sufficiently perplexing that no Greek Christian scholar commented on the passage for a thousand years! Yet, even if the early church did not know where to put it or what to say about it, they refused to discard the story. They realized that it conveyed something essential about the character of God.

Our Lord is teaching on the outskirts of the temple early in the morning when scribes and Pharisees intrude into his lesson, bringing to him a woman who had been caught in the act of adultery, caught in the very act! the text suggests -- a profane woman brought into the realm of the holy. To a casual observer, the theme of this encounter seems obvious: what is Jesus' attitude toward adultery? And what sentence will Jesus prescribe for this obvious adulterer?

But, my friends, our Bible is about life, real life. In real life, often what things seem to be about are seldom what they are about. This scene only pretends to be about adultery. In truth, it is about "politics," the kind of politics centered around personal interactions that infiltrates every social group, every community -- wonder of wonder, even churches. The scribes and Pharisees are only using this woman to catch Jesus within a trap of applied theology. Remember the scene where leaders bring Jesus a Roman coin and ask him whether or not it is lawful to pay taxes to Caesar? This is a similar sort of trap, the only difference being that the object under scrutiny is not an unfeeling coin but a humiliated woman whose life hangs in the balance.

First, let us understand how this scene is a trap for our Lord, how fraught it is with danger. Start by recollecting that in A.D. 30, the Roman government had stripped the Jewish religious and political leaders of the right to impose capital punishment. Yet Mosaic law clearly allowed for the stoning of this woman caught in adultery. If Jesus suggests letting the woman go, he will violate the clear tenets of Moses and undermine his moral authority in the eyes of the common people; if he pronounces lethal judgment upon her, he will be directly contradicting Roman policy and inciting seditious action. Yet the woman has clearly committed a great moral transgression. Jesus is a prominent religious leader. Surely, Jesus must say something about what this woman has done.

Bring the whole of Jesus' teaching and ministry into focus for a moment. We know that our Lord has elsewhere condemned adultery in the strongest possible terms. He has said unequivocally, "What God has joined together, let no one put asunder." Our Lord even condemned the internal adultery of a lustful heart.

His position on the issue of sexual purity was well-known, well-defined. I suspect that on the basis of his strong public statements about sexual responsibility the religious leaders were pretty sure how he would have to respond to this situation: prior comments would seem to have already boxed him in.

Nevertheless, in the presence of a woman who has clearly committed a great moral transgression, Jesus does not leap to judge her. The Scriptures say that he stoops down and writes with his finger on the ground, creating words in the dust.

What did he write? Jerome, the early Christian commentator, speculated that Jesus wrote the sins of the woman's accusers in the dust, turning the tables on them.

Another commentator, noting that it was the practice of a Roman judge to first write a judicial sentence in the presence of the court before reading it aloud, has suggested that Jesus wrote in the dust in verse 6 what he spoke in verse 7; then he wrote in verse 8 what he would say in verse 11.

There are those who think Jesus might be acting out Jeremiah 17:13, which says, "Those who turn away from You shall be written on the earth, for they have forsaken the Lord, the fountain of living water." There are those who think he wrote no words at all, but simply drew in the dust while he was thinking.

I think he wrote three simple words: "Look at her." "Look at her."

Having served as your pastor for nearly fifteen years,

I have naturally begun to wonder about the nature of my legacy here at St. John's.

Some wise wag once observed that everyone's life is eventually reduced to one sentence; I suspect that observation is right, and I wonder in the church's collective memory what my one sentence will be.

I sometimes fear my legacy will be: "Dr. Kremer: his whole ministry was one long capital campaign," which would be accurate, but depressing.

I would hope my legacy here would be, "He taught us to look at people simply as people."

That would be my hope, that when you look at people you don't see them as American, or Canadian or Sudanese or Mexican; that when you look at people you don't focus on whether they are gay or straight, black or white, rich or poor, Republican or Democrat, conservative or liberal, divorced, married or single, educated or illiterate -- it is my hope that when you look at a human being you see them first and foremost as a human being and a fellow child of God.

For that is how our Lord looks upon us, not as categories, but as individual children of God.

I think Jesus wrote in the dust, "Look at her!" He wants them to gaze upon her for a moment and see her as she is, not as a sinner worthy of death, not even as a weapon with which to trap him -- he wants them to see her as she is, a shamed, shivering, embarrassed human being.

Her accusers want to use her as a weapon, but Jesus turns her into a mirror. Look at her.

Look at her and see your own vulnerability, remember your own wrong choices under pressure, ponder the list of your own failures, think of your own feet of clay.

Look at her and refuse to give grace to this woman only if you believe yourself forever immune to the need for grace: "Let him who is without sin cast the first stone."

Our Lord had highly-developed spiritual antennae; I think he smelled the stench of insincerity permeating this entire scene.

The woman was a sinner, yes, but she was no more so than the accusers who nabbed her.

I think our Lord sensed the whole thing reeked of a set-up.

Indeed, she may have been set-up by her own fiancé.

The groom's motivation for doing so would have been pure greed. If, while engaged to be married, a woman was found guilty of adultery, her fiancé could collect her substantial dowry without marrying her.

Apparently, a fiancé frequently hired someone to seduce his betrothed spouse, arranged for a public discovery, then reaped the ensuing profits.

You could gain all the goods, and not have to take the girl!

Two facts suggest that this might be the case.

First, the accusers want to stone this young woman. Mosaic law specifically prescribes stoning only in the case of a woman who commits adultery while engaged to someone else.

Moreover, though it takes two to tango, only the woman has been brought before Jesus.

Her accomplice --- or was it her husband's accomplice? -- was nowhere to be found.

"Let the one of you who is without sin cast the first stone," our Lord commands.

Nobody budges.

So Jesus stoops once more and writes in the dust. The accusers look over his shoulder.

Then the Scriptures say that one by one, they read and walk away, the oldest men first, then the younger.

Perhaps the youngest simply waited out of respect, letting the eldest go first, but I don't think so.

I suspect the eldest men left first because age and experience enabled them to understand Jesus' point more readily. Whatever Jesus wrote in the dust caused them to look at this young woman not as a criminal to be stoned but as a child to be scolded.

It dawned on the old men that they had lived long enough to see their own children disappoint them, to have seen their own children make terrible choices.

Yet no matter how their children had failed, they loved them -- they would always love them.

No matter what their children did, nothing they could do would make their parents cease to love them.

Some of these old men had lived long enough to lose a child, and that pain had made them cherish children all the more, everybody's children, anybody's children.

Suddenly, the old men looked at this young woman in such a way that they knew that they could not act as her executioner.

They turned and walked away. As all the old men left, one by one, the young men caught the point.

Finally, there was no one left. "Does no one condemn you?" Jesus asks. "No one, Lord," she replies.

Notice, this young woman is left alone with the man who has declared,

"If your eye causes you to sin, you would do best to pluck it out."

Yet Jesus knows there is a time to state the ideal, and there is a time to state a word of grace.

The time to state the ideal is when it can illumine and educate and edify.

The time not to state the ideal is when it can destroy.

Jesus knows that to say the wrong thing here would destroy this young woman.

So our Lord says, "Neither do I.

Neither do I condemn you. Go and live oriented differently. Go and sin no more."

Now this is the Sunday after Easter. Yet the resurrection Spirit of our Christ is alive and well.

When our Lord says to that young woman, "Go and sin no more,"

no less than on Easter morning, God effected a resurrection as surely as the Father raised his Son!

When Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you," he raised that young woman from the dead!

He filled her with the spirit of life.

My brothers and sisters in Christ, this is the purpose of theology,

to raise people's lives from the dead by the power of love,

to restore people to dignity and reclaim twisted lives, regenerate broken personalities.

We are to use our faith to infuse dry lives with God's resurrection spirit, to lift lives from the dead -- that is that we are supposed to be doing.

Okay, what were the words Jesus wrote in the dust the second time?

I think that beneath the words, "Look at her," Jesus added this sentence. "She is your daughter."

“Look at her. She is your daughter.”

When the old men looked upon this young woman as they would look upon a fallen child, when the young men looked upon her as they would look a foolish sister, their perspective changed. Once they looked upon her with fresh eyes, as they would look upon someone whom they loved, they could not condemn her; they could only hope for her redemption.

July 4th, 1913: they staged the Civil War re-enactment of all re-enactments:

On the fiftieth anniversary of the Battle of Gettysburg,
historians waged a re-enactment using the remnant of original participants.

Yes, they deployed those old Union soldiers, arraying them atop Cemetery Ridge,

Yes, they placed the ancient Rebels at the bottom of the great meadow,
re-creating Pickett’s famous, doomed charge.

An audience of thousands of onlookers and photographers were on hand.

As they advanced up the hill, the old Confederates let loose one last famed Rebel yell, and, for a moment, the Union soldiers were transported back fifty years to the fear and trembling of that terrible charge.

Then they peered out from their walls and saw not a bunch of guys with rifles and bayonets,
but a gaggle of old men, struggling to make it up the hill on canes and crutches.

The Union soldiers came out from behind their rocks to help the old Rebs climb the hill.

When they reached the top together, they hugged and cried.

After a half-century, these old warriors had ceased to look upon each other as enemies;

They had come to look upon each other with fresh eyes, as brothers.

If we go through life angry at all the failures of other people,

we are going to stay angry, because there are sinners everywhere.

There is too much sin in the world for us to defeat it by throwing stones.

If there is any hope for our world, it is that we look upon those around us with eyes of mercy,

for only if we look with eyes of love can we bring the power of God’s resurrection

into the lives of people desperate for hope.

“Look at her! She is your daughter.”

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