

Intimacy: Into-Me-See
“Where are they? Has no one condemned you?”
John 8:1-11

A woman is dragged, naked, from where she has been caught with a man who is not her husband. The man, mysteriously, is nowhere in sight. We read about these things happening in other parts of the world: Afghanistan, Pakistan, India. In an American context, the scene is almost too dramatic, shocking, for us to take in. But stay with it for a moment. This is the story from John’s Gospel that we read this morning.

The neighborhood watch group that found the couple brought her to a place where they knew they’d find Jesus. Her crime presents the perfect test case to challenge Jesus with. OK, they were saying to Jesus; your speeches sound pretty radical, but you said your intention is to hold the spirit of the Law, not tear down our grandparents’ traditions. So try this: The law says clearly that this woman should be stoned...to death. What do you say now?

This moment wasn’t about this woman; she was just a prop. It was about politics.

You know the story. Jesus refused to be drawn in to their challenge. He didn’t stand up and beat on his chest about justice and mercy; instead he bent down and did some strange doodling in the sand. It must have been an odd moment for everybody there, waiting for him to say something. They wondered whether he’d heard them. And then he lifted his head and said, “Go ahead. Stone her, if that’s what the law says. But let the first stone be thrown by someone who has never done any wrong himself.”

It must have taken a minute or two for those words to sink in. But when they did, everyone stopped. Those men who had felt so good about doing their job as keepers of the Law just a minute ago suddenly felt the frame shift; they no longer stood so clearly on the “doing right” side of this picture. Jesus had called up in each one some memory that he’d pushed down: the time he’d pushed his wife against the wall, or pilfered office supplies from his employer. Suddenly each one felt like Jesus had taken that bad habit or mean streak you could almost pretend didn’t matter and he put it right out there like an extra weight on your stone-throwing arm. Each of those men slowly, reluctantly, dropped his rock and walked away. No doubt hating Jesus, because that’s what we do: we hate people who remind us of the things we wanted to remain hidden.

Jesus turned to the woman, whose head must have still been down to protect her face from the rocks she had expected to start flying at her. I think probably she had heard Jesus’ words differently than the men heard them. I bet she thought Jesus was saying, “Go ahead. Execute her.” And so she too reacted slowly when she realized Jesus was talking to her. His words were questions: “Where are they? Has no one condemned you?” She looked around; suddenly the square that had been full of angry, righteous men a few minutes ago was empty.

She could have gotten up at that moment and walked away. But she was naked, I’m guessing; the Bible doesn’t say that, but think about the circumstances she’d been caught in. And if I’m

right, we have to stop for a moment and remember that nakedness is always a metaphor in the Bible, a code word. We saw it in the very first chapters of Genesis, when Adam and Eve ate fruit from the tree that God told them to stay away from. When they did, they realized they were...naked. Ashamed. In the Bible, public nakedness is always a symbol of shame.

What Adam and Eve didn't know as they scrambled to find leaves big enough to cover them, and what this woman didn't know when she huddled in front of Jesus trying to cover herself with her arms, is that even the things that shame us don't keep God out of our life. That God never turns away from people in disgust. That God's way is to move toward us, especially when we are most conscious of how broken we are. Every time.

"Neither do I condemn you," Jesus said to the woman, with kindness in his eyes. "Go home. Try not to break the law again."

And so, this guilty woman and all of her accusers found themselves in exactly the same condition when they left Jesus that day. In some way, Jesus had exposed each of them to a hard truth about themselves. Each of them—accusers and accused—was broken, guilty, sinful you might say. Each of them deserved condemnation. That's what it means to be human. Your brokenness is a given, Jesus seemed to be saying to them. How will you live with that?

Jesus didn't have to condemn them. Each of them condemned themselves.

This is the voice of shame. It's a voice that has a microphone inside every one of us, and sometimes the voice is so loud, it imprisons us, keeps us going around and around the same track. Brene Brown is one of our cultural teachers these days on this topic. In a TED talk that went viral a few years ago, she said, "Shame is the gremlin who says, 'Uh, uh. I know you. You never finished that MBA. Your husband left you. I know what you do, and what you over-do, when you're alone. I know those things that happened to you when you were growing up. I know you don't think that you're pretty, smart, talented or powerful enough.' Shame is that thing."

For most of us, she says, shame is a tape in our heads that plays two sentences over and over again: "You're not good enough," and, if you can talk it out of that one, "Who do you think you are?" Shame is not the same thing as guilt, she says. Shame's focus is on yourself, while guilt focuses on behavior. Guilt says "I did something bad." Shame says, "I am bad." Guilt says: I'm sorry. I made a mistake. Shame says: I am a mistake.

Jesus asks this woman, *Where are they? Has no one condemned you?* And then he says, "I'm not going to condemn you either." She is free—except for that voice inside her own head: *Not good enough. Who do you think you are?*

Sometimes I think the whole point of a spiritual life is dealing with that voice. Practicing the replacement sentences that will drown it out, enough so that you can hear God saying to you: Neither do I condemn you. No matter what you have done; no matter what those things are that you have never told anyone and you can hardly admit to yourself, those things you have worked so hard to cover up: I know them and I love you anyway.

Victor Hugo retold this Gospel story in his novel *Les Miserables*, published in 1862. This scene is early in the novel. The main character, Jean Valjean, has been just released from prison after nineteen years of hard labor for the crime of theft. As part of his probation, he's required to show his criminal record to anyone he comes into contact with, whether he's looking for a hotel or food or a job. And so, he gets used to being treated as an outcast. And then one night, when he's right on the edge of starvation and his own sanity, Valjean knocks on the door of a home that belongs to a priest. The priest is gracious to him; he invites Valjean in for dinner and to stay for the night. He treats him as a welcome guest; he brings out the best food, serves it on his finest silver.

But no matter how he is treated, Valjean cannot see himself as anything other than a convict and a thief. This is what happens very early the next morning:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wF3FX43F-7Y>

If you have seen the movie or read the book or watched the beautiful musical *Les Miserables*, you know that this was a transforming moment in Jean Valjean's life. He *was* redeemed by the priest's forgiveness, just one person's refusal to condemn him. He spent the rest of his life honestly, courageously, repaying the grace that someone offered him.

Everything we have learned from life on this earth tells us that the universe must be organized according to a principle that says we get what we deserve. But the truth about God is something else. God's universe runs on a principle of grace, and it goes like this: You are known, not only for the accomplishments you're proud of, but also in every failure that shames you. *And still*, with that whole picture in God's eyes, you are loved beyond your wildest imagination. You don't make yourself good enough for God to love you. But when you know you are loved just as you are, it will make you good. This is what Jesus wanted that woman to hear. It's what he wants you to hear. Because it can change your life.