

Sanctifying

4th Sunday in Lent – March 17/18, 2007

Sermon Background Study

John 8:1-11 (NRSV)

Then each of them went home, ¹while Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. ²Early in the morning he came again to the temple. All the people came to him and he sat down and began to teach them. ³The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery; and making her stand before all of them, ⁴they said to him, “Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. ⁵Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?” ⁶They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. ⁷When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, “Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” ⁸And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground. ⁹When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders; and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. ¹⁰Jesus straightened up and said to her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” ¹¹She said, “No one, sir.” And Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.”

“Do not sin again.” Really? Doesn’t Jesus know that the woman is only human, that we are only human. What could he mean? What can he expect?

I find it both fascinating and deeply significant that one of the most familiar stories from John, indeed from all the New Testament, was not original to John’s gospel nor is there much chance it was even written by John. Rather, it was part of the oral traditions about Jesus that circulated through the Christian communities and was later incorporated into this gospel.

The story of the adulterous woman, as it is commonly called, is bracketed in your Bible because it is simply not found in the best and oldest manuscripts of John. None of the Christian writers of the first two centuries refer to the story. The story only begins appearing in western manuscripts of the fourth century and later. In the East, the Orthodox make no mention of it for a millennium.

Yet, this story has the ring of authenticity and truth. Perhaps, in the end, the Christian community concluded that it was too good to leave out. Though written more in the style of Luke than of John, this story of Jesus is in the right place. The context in John’s gospel helps us to interpret the story and the story helps us to interpret the context.

Indeed, who can imagine John’s gospel without this story? We are reminded that the Bible is not only the work of man but of God, who has given us the books that God desires us to have.

A morality play?

This story is typically read as a morality play teaching some truths that we all need to hear. Don’t throw stones if you live in a glass house, for one. Yet, a closer look reveals that this story is not so much about a few so-called timeless truths as it is about Jesus and his authority.

On the last day of the Festival of Tabernacles, Jesus goes to the temple courtyards. There, in the early morning, a group of Pharisees and scribes bring before Jesus a woman allegedly caught in the act of adultery. The question is why? Why don’t they bring the man? The man and the woman are both condemned under the Law of Moses. Why bring her to Jesus? The confrontation between the Jewish leaders and Jesus is well established and is getting ever hotter. Where are the witnesses? Why this woman at this time? This law of condemnation was largely unenforced. Why now?

But Jesus understands what the reader is told – this is a trap. If Jesus agrees with the Pharisees and scribes that the woman is to be stoned, then he will have allowed the Pharisees to prevail in their unjust treatment of the woman. Jesus will even be in trouble with the Romans for instigating a stoning, whereas only the Roman governor could order a death sentence. If Jesus does not enforce the Law of Moses, then he will be seen as lax and uncommitted to God’s Law.

Jesus, exercising wisdom reminiscent of Solomon, refuses to answer the Pharisees’ question on their terms. Instead, he kneels down and begins writing in the dust. We don’t know what he wrote, but that

“The Jesus Tomb” . . . Not-so-fun baloney

I was often asked what I thought of *The DaVinci Code*. I called it “fun baloney,” a decent thriller but fiction from front to back. Now, another much-hyped proposal promises to tell us the long-suppressed truth about Jesus. The “Jesus tomb” folks have woven a bold tale based on pseudo-science, bad assumptions, and worse history: “not-so-fun baloney.”

In 1980, archaeologists discovered a first-century tomb on the outskirts of old Jerusalem. In it, there were a number of ossuaries¹, including nine which bore the name of the person whose bones were within the box. Several had no inscription. Some of the bone boxes had common names on them, “Matthew,” Judah,” and “Mary.” One was inscribed “Jesus, son of Joseph.” Another bore the inscription “Mariamenou-Mara.” The producers of “The Jesus Tomb” suggest that these bone boxes are those of Jesus and his family, including a wife, Mary Magdalene, and a son, Judah.

The flurry of activity and interest around this will fade fast, as reputable scholars run away from this project. Here are just a few of the problems with the proposal. You can learn more by going to www.benwitherington.blogspot.com or www.howeabout.com.

- Much is made of an ossuary that supposedly went missing from the tomb. The TV tomb team proposes that the recently brought forward James bone box is the missing box. If this were shown to be so, the proposal would be strongly bolstered as the box reads, “James, son of Joseph, brother of Jesus.” Jesus had a half-brother named James. The problem with the claim is that while the tomb was opened in 1980, a few weeks ago in a trial over the James bone box, the FBI said a photo of the box dated to the 1970’s. Further, the archaeologists who opened the tomb state unequivocally that the “missing” box was not inscribed and so was simply set aside. It seems that there are many uninscribed ossuaries for sale.
- Richard Bauckham, a prominent NT scholar, has already demonstrated that the name on another box almost certainly can’t be that of Mary Magdalene. “Mariamenou-Mara” probably refers to two women – a Mary & a Martha – perhaps even a mother and child, as “Mariamenou” is a diminutive form of Mary.
- What is a large Greek inscription doing inside a supposed Aramaic-speaking Jewish family tomb?
- Why would Jesus’ bone box be unornamented, when other bone boxes in the tomb were carefully decorated?
- The film is silly to suggest that the woman of John 19:26-27 is Mary Magdalene when the text clearly states that Jesus is speaking to his mother.

1. An ossuary is a box large enough to hold a person’s bones. In the first-century, Jews buried their dead by laying the body on a slab for a year or so, until only the bones were left. They’d collect the bones, put them in an ossuary and then store the ossuary in a tomb with other boxes.

is less important than the act itself. Perhaps he means to enact the words of Jeremiah: “Those who turn away from you shall be written in the earth, for they have forsaken the fountain of living water, the LORD” (Jeremiah 17:13). Regardless, Jesus’ act is dismissive. He is in charge, not the Pharisees nor the scribes. He will not engage them on their terms, but his own. After telling them that whoever is without sin can throw the first stone, Jesus kneels back down in the dust and resumes his writing. He is done with the Pharisees and scribes – they are dismissed.

When the crowd has melted away, Jesus confronts the woman herself. He has no interest in her past. He doesn’t even ask her whether the charges are true or not. Jesus has come not to judge the world but to save it (John 12:47) and he will not condemn this woman. Jesus invites her to embrace a new future, a future lived in right relationship with God and others – a future without sin.

Sinning no more

Sin is the gulf that sits between us and God, a gulf bridged only Jesus Christ. Sin is all the ways, big and small, that we don’t love God and others. Sin is manifested in our pride, our gossip, our revenge, our impatience, our selfishness. When Jesus invites the woman to a life without sin, he is urging her toward holiness, toward the removal of sin from every part of her life. John Wesley called this process “sanctification.” It is a word that speaks to our becoming ever more one with God in thought and action, making the image of God within us shine brightly so that we might be “living sacrifices, holy and acceptable to God,” (Romans 12:1) in all things.

Yet, despite Jesus’ invitation to the woman and to each of us, we are too quick to dismiss such talk of sinning no more as an admirable but impossible goal. Yet, John Wesley’s life verse was Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 5:48: “Be perfect, therefore as your heavenly Father is perfect.” Wesley’s ministry can be read as a decades-long devotion to helping people see that by the power of the Holy Spirit such perfection can be ours. To this day, the United Methodists embrace Jesus’ invitation as genuine and achievable. As an old saying goes, it isn’t that Christianity has been tried and failed, it’s been rarely tried. We give up too easily. We accept too little. We expect too little of ourselves and of God.

Out of some sort of morbid fascination, I will sometimes cruise TV channels listening to all the self-professed miracle-workers, promising healings and financial windfalls. They fail to recognize that God’s work in this world is about redemption and renewal, calling people to the love of God and one another as it is to be lived out by his people. Jesus invites the woman to a holy life, the same life to which you and I are called.

Reading With Heart & Mind

March 18 - 24

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions or thoughts that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Sunday John 10:1-19 Jesus takes upon himself the image of God as the Good Shepherd. Why do those who oppose him (“the Jews”) think he must be possessed by a demon?</p>	<p>Monday John 10:22-42 Jesus’ revelation of his relationship with God culminates in v.38: “The Father and I are one.” Why do you think that so many do not believe? Why do some believe?</p>
<p>Tuesday John 11:1-16 Why do you think Jesus delays in going to Lazarus? What do you think he does for those two days? Why is Jesus glad that he wasn’t there when Lazarus died?</p>	<p>Wednesday John 11:17-27 Why is Martha and later Mary so caught up in “If only . . .”? What does Jesus mean by saying that those who believe in him will never die? Why does Jesus weep?</p>
<p>Thursday John 11:28-44 Again, why is Jesus deeply disturbed? How does this resuscitation of Lazarus show the glory of God (v. 40)? Does Jesus ever pray for Lazarus’ raising? How does this raising differ from Jesus’ resurrection?</p>	<p>Friday John 11:45-57 The Jewish high council passes a death sentence on Jesus. What is the irony in Caiaphas’ talk of letting one man die? What does this scene say about Jesus’ later appearance before the Jewish authorities after his arrest?</p>
<p>Saturday John 12:1-11 Mary’s anointing of Jesus foreshadows his burial. What do you find most surprising in this scene? Why do the chief priests want to execute Lazarus?</p>	

Sermon Notes

The Spring Bible Academy session begins in a week. For class information and to register on-line go to www.standrewacademy.org

**Want to grow in your faith? Want to find the life you've always wanted?
Now is a great time to begin training, not merely trying.**

Perhaps you desire a deeper and more meaningful relationship with God. Maybe you'd like to study the Bible with other Christians in a relaxed and stimulating environment. Maybe you want to help your children succeed in school. Perhaps you are exploring Christianity for the first time. Perhaps you even want to better understand your dreams. For all this and more, the St. Bible Andrew Academy and our faculty are here to help. Make plans now to join us for one or more of these classes. You'll be glad you did.

"Five Hot Questions About Islam"

Come to Scott's class in Wesley Hall at 9:30 next Sunday, March 25

The high school youth will be joining Scott's *Something More* class on March 25 for a one-time look at some of the most-asked questions about Islam. What are the basics of Islam? What's the difference between Sunni and Shia? What really is jihad? We hope that you'll join us for this fascinating and helpful look at one of the world's largest religions,

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

Sometimes, people treat this story as if Jesus is teaching about tolerance. But it isn't about tolerance, it is about forgiveness. Jesus doesn't seem to doubt that the charges against the woman are true. If she were falsely charged, Jesus' invitation to her wouldn't make much sense. She is guilty of adultery. Jesus doesn't ignore her sin or "tolerate" it as if it doesn't matter. He doesn't tolerate her sin, he forgives it. How much do we practice forgiveness with the people who have wronged us, who have hurt us? Do we forgive as Jesus did, or do we focus our energies on condemnation of the wrong? Why do we so often nurture our hurts, unwilling to let go of the past and move on to new life?

Jesus tells the woman to go and not sin again. Do you think he is being "realistic?" Why are we so quick to call this an impossible ideal? What is the message for us in this? How can we grow in holiness, in sinlessness? What ought to be our goal? What is God's part in this? What is our own? Where does this fit in with your beliefs about salvation?

Though not original to the gospel, this story is of a piece with John's overarching theme: Who is Jesus? How does his authority stack up against the religious establishment? It is telling that chapter 8 opens with the question of the woman's stoning and closes with Jesus being stoned himself (8:59), brought on by Jesus' increasingly plain identification of himself with God. Who says something like, "Before Abraham was, I am" (8:58)? Are there religious authorities within the Christian community today that Jesus threatens and confronts? What characterizes such authorities? Are there messages that all Christian leaders should take away from these confrontations between Jesus and the authorities of his day?