

“The Grace and Truth of Jesus”

Introduction: Back in the year 2006, a new word became part of our official lexicon. In that year, Merriam-Webster selected the word truthiness as its Word of the Year. You may recall that this word had been coined by late-night comedian Stephen Colbert to describe in a satirical way how politicians could bend the truth to support their actions, but it quickly caught on in the rest of life. Here’s the Webster definition:

truthiness, n. the quality of preferring concepts or facts one wishes to be true, rather than the concepts or facts known to be true.

Commenting of their selection of this word, Merriam-Webster president John Morse explained that it was a playful way to capture the fact that in many people’s minds, “truth has become up for grabs” (Unfinished, Richard Stearns, 1-2).

It is apparent that to the religious leaders of Jesus’ day, the truth had become up for grabs as they looked at the way Jesus seemed to ignore or take lightly the law of God as it had come to his people through Moses. And to a large wing of the church in its first few centuries it seemed like the truth was up for grabs as they reflected on this text before us. In fact, in most of your Bibles, the text has a footnote to it explaining that it doesn’t appear in the earliest manuscripts of John’s gospel. The best explanation I’ve seen for this apparent exclusion is that since rampant immorality was pervasive throughout the Roman Empire in the early days of the church, and since the church was desperately trying to live and promote an alternative, kingdom of God lifestyle to what was going on in the culture around it, that the church simply didn’t like the way Jesus seemed to go easy on this woman who had been caught in the act of adultery. Jesus’ refusal to have her at least perform some penance or public service was at odds with the sentiment of this period, and so it seems to have been shoved under the carpet for a while.

However, the weight of the evidence is that this is indeed an historically accurate event, one that took place within the life of Jesus; scholars are just not certain where it should be placed. But what is truly challenging about this text is not so much where it belongs within John’s gospel, or any other gospel for that matter, but how the twin pillars of grace and truth, of God’s love and God’s holiness, his mercy and his justice, work themselves out and work together. What Jesus reveals to us, in any generation or culture, is not that the truth is up for grabs, but both a gracious, forgiving spirit, and a firm call to the transformation of our life as we respond to his grace by living in the truth.

I. The Attempt at a Trap

A. It begins with Jesus, having arrived in the temple courts in Jerusalem at dawn and sitting down to teach. When in Jerusalem, especially at feast time, Jesus seemed to make this his practice. He would stay at the home of his good friends Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, who lived in the town of Bethany on the east side of the Mount of Olives, and then walk down to Jerusalem early each morning to teach at the temple (cf. Lk. 21:37-38). It was a public venue so anyone could come. On this particular morning, some of the Jewish religious leaders jostled their way to the front, past those who were clutching cups of tea and fresh bagels, and stood before Jesus with a woman in tow. She was, they declared, an adulteress. She had, in fact, been “caught in the act.”

B. As we reflect on this, several disturbing observations can be made. First, these men obviously cared very little for this woman. If they had, you would think that they might have at least asked for a private audience with Jesus, rather than exposing her to a kind of public lynching. Second, you don’t commit adultery alone; where was the man? Did he somehow escape

out the window, or might he have been part of the plot? I say plot because, third, so that suspicious husbands could not falsely accuse their wives in order to easily get rid of them, the law required firm evidence in the form of at least two witnesses who had actually seen the couple in the act. This virtually required that a trap be set, which Jesus had a pretty clear idea was taking place. They had likely not only set a trap for this woman (which, as we will see doesn't excuse her), but they certainly had come to set a trap for Jesus. Is he the Messiah, the true King? they wondered. If he pronounced this woman "forgiven," which they were pretty certain he would do, then he would be seen to be telling the people to ignore the justice of law of Moses, which no Messiah would ever do.

## II. The Anticipation of the Cross

A. In response, Jesus did something curious, but also very Jesus like! He said nothing and instead, bent down and began to write in the dust with his finger. Perhaps it was to calm himself or buy some time to reflect on his answer. Maybe it was to write a Bible verse or two. It was certainly the method geometry teachers used to explain things to their pupils in the days before chalkboards, overheads, and power point. Whatever he was doing, the woman's accusers grew impatient. Finally, Jesus stood up and said words that have actually become fairly famous: "Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." What a risky response to make! What if they took Jesus up on it? In point of fact, Jesus was actually responding according to the law saying, in effect, that if we're going to get serious about the law then we will all find ourselves guilty. Somehow that cut to the heart and the hypocrisy of these fellows was exposed. As Jesus went back to writing, the men all dropped their stones and went away, led by the older, and probably wiser, ones, until no one was left except Jesus and the woman.

B. Actually, if I may say so, these fellows did one thing right. They brought this woman to Jesus. Even though their motives were highly flawed, she was now where she needed to be. What would he do? When he saw that they were alone, Jesus stood up again. What would he say? Importantly, there are two responses he does not make. He does not wink and say, "Oh well, never mind." Her sin was real and it needed to be dealt with. But neither does he say, "You did WHAT??!" as if she were the most horrible person in the world. Instead, Jesus declares the woman to be forgiven; he does not condemn her. What's more, she can go free.

C. How does that happen? How is that just? Shouldn't she at least have to serve for a couple of years at the local orphanage? Perhaps the end of the chapter gives us a clue, which is why the beginning of John 8 seems to me to be such a good place for this episode to find a home. The chapter ends, after a great deal of discussion which we'll get to in the next couple of weeks, with the religious leaders picking up stones again, not to stone this woman, but to stone Jesus (8:59). And of course, as the table to which we are going to go reminds us, Jesus actually, finally, did get stoned, to death, crucified actually. And the point is this: Jesus got stoned so that we wouldn't have to. He doesn't minimize our sin or ignore justice with a wink and a smile; he takes our sin away by taking the just penalty prescribed by the law upon himself. But it's not the end, for then he says to the woman, "Go now and leave your life of sin." There is a response to be made to grace, and that is that we are to live in newness of life, not in our own power but in the power of the Spirit, whom Jesus had just promised the day before would be poured out after he had done his work for us on the cross (7:37-39).

Conclusion: And so here are the questions this well placed text places before us: Will we receive the amazing grace that Jesus offers us, substituting himself for us on the cross? Will we respond by seeking to live a transformed life, one that seeks to understand and live in his truth? And, especially in this climate of truthiness, of moral confusion, can we walk away from the temptation to be condemning of others, dropping our stones and simply bringing others to Jesus so that he can minister to them through his grace and in his truth as he sees fit? Each of these invitations is open to us as we come to the table together.