

Stepping Away
John 7:53-8:11

A Sermon by Brenda M. Baker
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I chose this particular passage for a variety of reasons. First, I love the Gospel of John and the perspective and writing style that this author had; I think it is a unique and interesting perspective. Now I realize that this passage has probably one of the most quoted lines of scripture in verse 7, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her", yet that is not what drew me to this story. Rather, I was drawn to the action of the characters in these verses.

Let's take a couple of minutes and gather a bit of understanding as to what was happening at this time. Jesus was teaching at a time and a place of great conflict. The bulk of this passage takes place in the temple in Jerusalem. This was a Jewish and Gentile community. The authorities of this day (Pharisees) were struggling among themselves to hold on to what authority they had within their community. The timing of this passage was that of the Festival of Booth. This was a week-long feast involved people sacrificing burnt offerings each day and living in temporary shelters known as booths. These booths, made from branches, were to serve as reminders of the Israelites wilderness wandering days. On day seven of the feast, the Priest presents libations after the morning offering, reciting from Isaiah 12:3 "with joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation," commemorating the rock that provided water during the Israelites journey in the desert. In chapter 7, Jesus refers to himself as the water of life

who can quench thirsty believers. On the eighth and final day of the Feast, the Proper Feast is held in which all males are required to participate.

The people who Jesus is teaching are predominately those who are not highly educated. Those who were more highly educated were those who were in authority and held the positions of elders (priests), scribes and Pharisees.

Women were certainly not given a place of prominence in society in this day. This particular woman who is featured in this passage was not only being used as an example of sin, but she was also being used as a pawn to trick Jesus. This woman, standing alone, was charged with being caught in the act of adultery. **Yet, where was the man with whom she had committed this act?** And, as the Pharisee does state, Moses did give various instructions (the law) in Deuteronomy 22: 20-24 regarding the punishment for both men and women in that stoning was the punishment for adultery.

It is of interest to note why they (the Pharisees) would not have dealt with this situation on their own. They were Pharisees who knew and were committed to maintaining the purity of the law. Why not take this woman to an elder or chief priest to carry out the law? Why bring her to this teacher, to Jesus, for any other reason than to catch him in a “wrong” of some kind?

So Jesus has been teaching the crowd, the Festival is drawing to a close soon and the Pharisees are sensing a loss of control and authority. And although the trap is set and the question is asked of Jesus, he remains calm and just bends down and writes on the ground with his finger. And when he finally does

respond to them, Jesus simply states, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." And then he calmly returns to writing on the ground.

Imagine, if you will, that you are a part of this crowd. Or, better still, imagine that **you** are one of the elders ~ that is, a part of this Pharisee group; those who were known for supervising the observance of the laws. Think of the inventory of their own lives that must have been happening in their minds. Now we have all had occasions where we've had to quickly take summary of a situation, put ourselves in someone else's shoes, and then comes **the decision** as to whether we are going to be true and authentic with our thoughts and match them up with our actions.

But look at the position these Pharisee elders are in. They were sent as part of a continued quest from earlier in the gospel to trick Jesus, which would hopefully, lead to his arrest. So in the few seconds of these men taking inventory of their lives regarding their sin I wonder if at least one of them was thinking, "Okay, so this Jesus guy has got me. I've sinned, yea, I've sinned ~ but I'm an elder. Surely you don't expect me to NOT throw any stones, or at least suggest that it should be done. Gosh, what is it going to look like if I don't keep up the law of stoning? I've got a reputation to maintain here. I mean, I know I've sinned, but nobody else knows, unless..."

Now, I'm not saying that all of the elders struggled like that or even thought that way. Yet, I'm inclined to believe that at least one of them might

have because one of them took that first step and walked away. And that took courage; an incredible amount of courage.

So they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders. Each of those elders could have chosen a different action but they didn't. They walked away. The crowd of people, who were not well educated, followed the elders' example.

Now, I mentioned earlier that this story takes place during a time of great conflict. Jesus was teaching at a time that is not unlike our own today. These elders were already sensing a loss of authority within their community. So what a risk it was for these authority figures to step away, to not do what usually was their "job" in carrying out the laws.

These were folks who were prominent religious and influential figures in their community. And you know what ~ so are we. In our communities many of us are the ones that **are** seen or **will be seen** as the authority figures related to issues that can affect the lives of others. And did you notice the part in the passage when Jesus bends down and writes on the ground? Did you ever wonder about that part as to what Jesus was writing on the ground? Well, there are several theories but I would offer that it was a way to allow the time these individuals needed for introspection. How many times have we wished that **we** had just paused before we opened our mouths and said something, or paused and thought or counted before we did or didn't do something? That takes introspection and that takes courage.

Now, many of you may have chosen a profession, or will choose one, in which there are times when you have had to choose, to risk, to step out with courage; **away from what the rest of the crowd expected you to do or what was, or is, popular.** There are times, as ministers, or as a congregation, you have had to choose, to step away from the “law of the congregation” – you know, the way the congregation has always done it before, and you’ve taken a risk to make a change in order to reconcile ourselves with what we sense to be true and authentic to what God wants us to do.

And in case you think I am not speaking to you as children and youth ~ think again. This stepping away and being authentic to what God is calling you to do (or not do) is not related to just adults. Courage comes at all ages and in all shapes and sizes, and in all ways of gifts and talents, as well. I think of the courage it took to share the gifts and talents of those who took those marvelous photographs and to display them in the art exhibit we have seen over the past week in the Whitney room. I see the courage each week as people share their wonderful talents in our music ministry in our choirs, (the children, the adults and the handbells). And now I challenge you ~ when someone approaches you or you hear the need (**and there is a great need here**) as your ministries are growing – and that is a good thing – to think about risking to try new things in sharing yourself.

Now the story does not tell us what happens to these particular elders after this. And while some may say that their actions were done out of a sense of

their own guilt, I am left with the impression that the actions that they took on this day, at this occasion, was also out of a sense of love and grace and mercy.

May **we** have the courage to step out, one by one, and know that we are not alone as there is one who walks with us in our journey in love and in grace and in mercy. And, by example, may God's love guide our steps along the way.