

“The Jesus We Love”

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The reason we imagine stories about Jesus is that he changed everything.

John 7:53-8:1

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What?!?

The passage of Scripture we read a few minutes ago probably does not belong in the Bible. What?!? That may be a surprise to many of you. If you look carefully at your Bible, it probably has a note something like this embedded in the text, the margin, or the footnote: “The earliest manuscripts do not have John 7:53-8:11.”

Rather than undermining your faith in the Bible, this should have the opposite effect. Frank Turek noted Wednesday night that scholars are confident about 99.5%+ of what the original Gospel writers wrote. This passage is in the .5%. I have greater confidence in the rest of the New Testament because the editors of our English Bibles have been honest enough to say, “This was probably not in John’s Gospel.”

Let me illustrate. When Linda and I are long gone, if our kids were to find the note at the right in the box of letters from me to their Mom, they would immediately know I didn’t write it. They would notice (1) the handwriting is legible, (2) I never use that vocabulary, and (3) Mom wouldn’t like the analogy.



The list of reasons most scholars think the story of the woman at the well doesn’t fit John’s gospel is not important for this sermon. They’re easy to find on the [Internet](#). Here’s the main reason: if you could place your hands on a copy of John’s gospel in Greek or any other ancient language, or even a commentary on John’s gospel from the first 800 years of church history, you would not find this story. Ancient Christian literature either ignores it or rejects its legitimacy.

If that's true, why do our Bibles not just omit it? The main reason is that since the ninth century, most copies of the Bible do include it. This story has been included for more than a millennium.

A less technical answer why this story has been preserved is that we want it to be true. When we read John 7:53-8:1, we love this Jesus. So for the next few minutes, let's assume it does belong in John's gospel. Why do we love this Jesus?

Character (7:53-8:5)

First, we love this Jesus because of his character. He stands out in contrast to everyone else he encounters in the gospels – disciples, Nicodemus, the woman at the well, the religious and political leaders – everyone. We love him because he's perfect.

We left the story last week as Jesus' popularity plummeted in Galilee. At the beginning of chapter six he fed the 5000. They wanted to make him king. By the end of the chapter all his disciples had deserted him except the Twelve, and one of them was Judas. He asked them, "You don't want to leave too, do you?"

In chapter 7, which we skipped over, he's back in Jerusalem for the Feast of Tabernacles. He hadn't planned to go precisely because his skeptical brothers sarcastically told him he should do some miracles to show off. He went in secret halfway through the festival, but soon he was spotted. He started teaching, and once again, the reaction was mixed – from those who believed in him to those who wanted to arrest or even kill him to those who debated about him. Nicodemus reappeared in John's gospel, asking, "Does our law condemn a man without a hearing?"

At the end of that day, everyone left the temple courts and went home (53). Jesus had friends across the Kidron Valley on the Mount of Olives, so apparently he stayed with them overnight. When he resurfaced early the next morning on the massive stone platform housing the Second Temple that Herod had gloriously expanded, he started teaching again (2). He sat down, as teachers usually did.

The legal experts (scribes) and religious enforcers (Pharisees) have been busy overnight. They don't like that Jesus challenged them. They don't like that the crowds were drawn to him. They don't like that they didn't have a good answer for Nicodemus, who pulled the Torah card on them.

They bring to Jesus "a woman caught in adultery." We're not told if she was caught overnight or if it had been days or weeks earlier. We don't know whether she's feeling ashamed or defiant. We don't know if she was married or the guy was married.

We do notice they only bring her – not the man. In most cultures, including our own, there's too often a double standard for sexual infidelity. Good girls don't do that kind of thing but, you know, boys will be boys.

They “made her stand before the group” – not only the teachers and Pharisees but the large early morning crowd. The sun had fully illuminated the open courts of the temple. They said, probably sarcastically and definitely not sincerely, “Teacher, we caught her in the act. Moses said we should stone such as her. What do you say?”

John tells us it’s a trap, but doesn’t tell us why. I have often heard it has something to do with the Romans who didn’t allow the Jews to execute someone, but there’s no mention of that in the text. The more likely trap has to do with Jesus’ attitude toward the law. I suspect they often debated amongst themselves: Are we supposed to kill everyone Moses says to kill? Idolaters? Teenagers disrespectful to parents? Sabbath-breakers? Homosexuals? Blasphemers? There isn’t much evidence that they themselves were carrying out the death penalty. Was Jesus going to say outright, “Forget about the law of Moses; it no longer matters”?

This was an emotional and tense moment. It was designed to be. But we love this story because Jesus is not them. He’s not an adulterer and he’s not a faultfinder. He doesn’t do morally reprehensible or questionable things, but he doesn’t go looking for them either. He’s above reproach. He’s marked by integrity, trustworthiness, and consistency. We’re not wondering what he’s been up to over on the Mount of Olives all night. Whatever it was, it was good. Because he’s Jesus.

Wisdom (8:6-10)

Next, we love Jesus for his wisdom. Jesus doesn’t overreact to this situation. We love that about him. He doesn’t look at the woman with disdain and say, “Why did you do that?” He doesn’t glare at the accusers and ask, “Who do you think you are?” He doesn’t even ask, “Where’s the other partner in this offense?” He’s what we like to call a non-anxious presence. His blood doesn’t boil. His face doesn’t scrunch.

He pulls out his finger, but not to point at the woman or the accusers. He stoops down and writes on the ground (6). I know what you want from me at this point. You’ve heard theories of what Jesus wrote on the ground and you want to know what my theory is. The best pastors explain the unexplained mysteries of the Bible.

I’m going to disappoint you. I don’t know and I don’t care. Whatever Jesus wrote on the ground was of no interest to whoever wrote down this story. The best new insight I gained this week was that Jesus wrote with “his finger.” Exodus 31:19 says that God inscribed the Ten Commandments on tablets of stone with “his finger.” Make of that what you will.

Our narrator is interested in details other than what Jesus wrote on the ground – namely that Jesus “bent down to write” – seemingly ignoring the accusers and their accusation. They “kept on questioning him,” so he “straightened up and said, “Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her” (7). Literally, “Let the sinless *one* among *y’all...*” (emphasis added). He stooped and wrote some more (8).

This is a dramatic moment. We need not imagine that they had rocks in their hands. I don't really think they intended to stone her. If they had intended to, they would have had to drag her off the temple courts and outside the city gates, for multiple reasons. Better to have caught Jesus on the way in from the Mount of Olives if they wanted to stone her. They didn't want to stone her. They wanted to trap Jesus.

Here's another hint that what Jesus wrote on the ground is insignificant. Look at verse 9: "At this, those *who heard* began to go away..." (emphasis added). It's not what they *saw* (on the ground) that made them walk away. They *heard* what he said: "Let the sinless one among y'all..."

They all walk away – not just the accusers but apparently the crowd – one by one, beginning with the oldest. That detail's significance seems to be that the oldest ones are also not "sinless," and that they're the first to recognize it.

The only ones left at the scene are Jesus and the woman. He uses the same respectful but distant word with which he had addressed his mother: "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?"

She answered, "No one, Sir." Or, in some translations, "No one, Lord" – but don't make too much of that. She may or may not recognize that he is more than just a really kind man.

The point is, we love this Jesus because of his wisdom. He diffuses a volatile situation. He refuses to undermine the Law. He won't be drawn into a debate. He pierces their hearts. He knows when to speak, when to be silent, what to do and not to do. He's just being...well, Jesus. Nobody else can be Jesus in that moment like he can. And we love him for it.

Balance (8:11)

Finally, we love Jesus because of his balance. Balance is so hard, especially when it comes to sin. Even more so when it comes to the sin of others. One of the most memorable quotes for Linda and me all through our ministry was one from our college President, Robertson McQuilkin: "It's easier to go to a consistent extreme than to remain in the center of biblical tension."

Jesus says, "Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more." He doesn't condemn, but he doesn't condone. In this private moment with the woman, he knows the perfect thing to say. If only we had the wisdom to say just the right thing at the right moment. We don't have to feel that pressure. You're not Jesus, and neither am I.

When it comes to matters of tension regarding the Bible or anything else, you're probably not living in balance unless you feel pulled in both directions. If you find yourself thinking, "I don't have any problem with that balance," you probably do.

To be clear, only Jesus is responsible for condemnation in the sense of this word. That he is the Judge is a consistent theme in John and all the Gospels. That we are to judge in the sense of discern or make a moral decision, is unavoidable. As Dick Meyer says in *Why We Hate Us*, everyone either judges or is brain dead.

The word “condemn” is stronger than the word “judge.” It means “to judge against,” to deliver a judgment of “guilty and deserving of punishment.”

When Jesus says, “Neither do I condemn you,” he is not saying adultery doesn’t matter. He’s saying adultery can be acquitted. What’s important here is Jesus’ beautiful balance. He doesn’t condemn and he doesn’t condone. We love this Jesus.

I imagine my own ending to this story. I want to imagine that this woman’s life was changed that day, and so were the lives of at least some of the scribes and Pharisees. Maybe it wasn’t an instantaneous change; maybe it happened over time. But I would love to think that the early church included both adulterers and accusers whose lives had been changed by Jesus of Nazareth.

My ideal church is a church that includes the self-righteous and the self-condemned, the abuser and the victim, the oppressor and the victim. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said “The desire for ideal community destroys community,” but it’s still my ideal. It’s just that you can’t stop living in the actual community you’re part of.

One Solitary Life

This is such a great story that you’ve almost forgotten where I began this sermon – namely, that it’s most likely an addition to John’s original gospel. That doesn’t necessarily mean it never happened. Although they are in the minority, two late fourth century towers of the Christian faith – St. Jerome and St. Augustine – both took the story at face value. It’s certainly possible that this really happened, that it was one of stories John refers to at the end of his gospel. He says if you related everything Jesus ever did and said, the world couldn’t contain the books.

But let’s assume it’s fiction, that someone invented a story because in their imagination it drives home an important point about Jesus. Is it OK to imagine stories about Jesus?

It’s happened often. If you like the crowd-funded series “The Chosen,” there are many conversations and scenes that the writers imagine. If you like *Ben Hur*, *The Other Wise Man*, or *The Robe* – they all add to the basic story of the Gospels and add to them.

I would not speak as approvingly of *Jesus Christ Superstar*, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, or *The Da Vinci Code*. In my view, those accounts actually diminish Jesus. He’s too human, too much like us, unlike the perfection and deity of the Jesus in the Gospels.

But even those stories are tributes to Jesus. This story is even more so, because it is true to the record we have in the Gospels. The reason we Christians love him and defend him, the reason we study his life, even the reason we imagine more stories about him is because he changed everything.

James Allan Francis was a Canadian-born pastor who served what later became Riverside Baptist Church in New York City. He moved to Los Angeles in 1914. In 1926, he preached a sermon that was the basis for a poem that has traveled the globe. This expresses why we love Jesus.

*He was born in an obscure village, the child of a peasant woman.
He grew up in still another village, where he worked in a carpenter shop
Until he was thirty.
Then for three years he was an itinerant preacher.
He never wrote a book.
He never held an office.
He never had a family or owned a house.
He didn't go to college.
He never visited a big city.
He never traveled two hundred miles from the place where he was born.
He did none of the things one usually associates with greatness.
He had no credentials but himself.
He was only thirty-three when the tide of public opinion turned against him.
His friends ran away.
He was turned over to his enemies and went through the mockery of a trial.
He was nailed to a cross between two thieves.
While he was dying, his executioners gambled for his clothing,
The only property he had on Earth.
When he was dead, he was laid in a borrowed grave
Through the pity of a friend.
Twenty centuries have come and gone,
And today he is the central figure of the human race,
And the leader of mankind's progress.
All the armies that ever marched,
All the navies that ever sailed,
All the parliament that ever sat,
All the kings that ever reigned,
Put together have not affected the life of man on Earth
As much as that One Solitary Life.*

Amen.