

# “Good News... is Rooted in Justice, Mercy, and Faithfulness”

Rev. Adam Hange , John 8:2–11 | Matthew 4:23–5:7 (NRSVUE)

Content Note: Today’s text and sermon address adultery, sexual shame, and sexual abuse. Please take care of yourself as you need to.

## INTRODUCTION

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We are in the final stretch of Lent, steadily drawing closer to Jerusalem and the cross. As Jesus nears his last week, the conflict with the religious authorities sharpens — and their chief complaint is not that he’s too strict. It’s that he is *too forgiving*. Too dangerous to the systems of power that depended on keeping certain people in their place. Today’s story is about a woman, a crowd, a trap, and a teacher who refuses to play along.

## A STORY THAT REFUSES TO STAY OUT

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Here is a curious thing about this passage. It *never* appears in our three-year cycle of lectionary readings — the rotation of texts that many mainline churches follow Sunday by Sunday. And in many Bibles, it is actually printed in brackets, with a footnote that reads something like: *the earliest manuscripts do not include these verses*. Biblical scholars believe it was added centuries later — perhaps as late as 400 CE — floating between Gospels, as if the early church couldn’t quite decide where it belonged.

And yet. Here it is — still in our Bibles, still gripping the imagination. As humans, we love a good scandal, and this story delivers one. But I think it persists for a deeper reason: *because this same story keeps happening*. In every generation, someone is dragged to the center of a crowd. Stones are raised. And someone has to ask: *wait — where is the man?*

## THE SCENE: A TRAP DISGUISED AS RIGHTEOUSNESS

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Let's look a little more closely at what actually happens in the story...

Early in the morning, the temple courts are full, and Jesus is teaching. The scribes and Pharisees interrupt. They drag a woman forward and place her "in the midst" — the center of the crowd, exposed, humiliated. They announce that she has been caught in the very act of adultery. They cite the law of Moses. They ask Jesus what should be done.

Notice what the text tells us about their motivation: *"They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him."* This is not a crisis of public morality. This is a **setup**. The woman is not a moral problem to be solved — she is a pawn in a political game. Her humiliation is the bait in a trap that has been very carefully constructed. It's actually a trap with two triggers.

If Jesus says **stone her**, he breaks the Roman law. For, under Roman occupation, Jewish authorities did not have the power to carry out capital punishment — that authority belonged exclusively to Rome. To call for stoning would be to incite an *illegal* execution, making Jesus a seditious threat to imperial order.

If Jesus says **let her go**, he contradicts the Torah, and can then be dismissed as a false teacher who has no regard for the law of Moses. Either answer ends his ministry — or ends him. Torah-breaker or Roman insurrectionist. Pick one.

This is why what Jesus does next is so breathtaking. He doesn't take **either** A or B. Instead, he bends down and begins writing something in the dirt — what it is, we can only guess. Some have speculated - doodles, just to waste time, scriptures, like Exodus 20:17 (and Deut 5:21): The Tenth Commandment - which prohibits coveting (desiring/longing for) another person's spouse, focusing on the heart's intent... Or the names and sins of each of those present...

While we may never know exactly what he wrote, Jesus' "pause" alone is worth noticing. He refuses to be rushed by the mob's urgency. After he is done writing, he stands and reframes the entire question: not *what does the law require*, and not *what will Rome allow*, but: *Who here is qualified to throw the first stone?* He has stepped entirely outside their trap. He has moved the conversation from the legal to the moral, from the institutional to the personal.

And, then, *one by one, beginning with the elders* — the ones who have lived long enough to know their own failings — they walk away.

Notice also who is missing. If she was caught *in the very act* — *where is the man?* Levitical law required the punishment of both parties. But only she is here. Only she is exposed. The double standard is not incidental to the story. ***It is the story.*** This is how *systems of shame* operate: they land hardest on those with the least power.

What remains when the crowd is gone is remarkable: just Jesus, and the woman, standing there together. We don't know her story. We don't know if she was credibly accused, and if so, what brought her to that place. He does not minimize what has happened. He does not pretend. But he refuses to condemn. ***"Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again."***

Interestingly, he doesn't say *"you are innocent"* — but *"you are not condemned."* There is a difference, and it matters. Jesus asks the same thing of everyone in that courtyard — and extends the same dignity to everyone, too.

## THE SCARLET LETTER AND THE STONES WE STILL CARRY

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To read this story, I cannot help but think of Hester Prynne in *The Scarlet Letter* — forced to wear a red letter A as a permanent public mark of her adultery,

standing on a scaffold before the whole town. She is the spectacle, the lesson. And Reverend Dimmesdale stands in the crowd, unsuspected, revered. Hawthorne's novel is about what happens when a community decides that *some people's sins are public property* and others' are not — when shame is weaponized not to heal, but to enforce a hierarchy.

Hester's "A" was embroidered in scarlet thread. The woman in John 8 was dragged into the temple courts. The setting is different. The logic is not. And here's the thing — it's not just ancient history or 19th-century fiction. A Pew Research Center study released just this month surveyed adults in 25 countries about how they view the morality of their fellow citizens. Of all nine behaviors examined — gambling, alcohol, marijuana, pornography, abortion, divorce — extramarital affairs drew the strongest condemnation globally. Nine in ten Americans said having an affair is morally wrong - even those with no religious affiliation. And Americans, more than people in any other country surveyed, were more likely to view their fellow citizens as morally bad.

We are a nation primed to pick up this particular stone. Which makes it worth asking — as it was worth asking in that Jerusalem temple court — *who exactly ends up standing in the center of the crowd? **And who gets to walk away?***

## **WHEN THE STONES ARE STILL FLYING**

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Consider former DHS secretary, Kristi Noem — whatever one thinks of her politics - the gleeful public scrutiny over her rumored affair tells us something. When a woman's personal life is exposed, the crowd forms fast. Meanwhile, men credibly accused of far worse — of predation, of systematic abuse of power — often face no political reckoning at all. This double standard is the same double standard that put only the woman in the center of the temple courts.

In the last week, it has also come to light that César Chávez — the celebrated labor organizer, a genuine hero to millions of working people — sexually abused girls as young as twelve and thirteen. And that among those he harmed was Dolores Huerta herself, the co-founder of the United Farm Workers. She publicly acknowledged that she was raped, repeatedly. Children were born from those assaults and raised in secret for decades. Now nearing the end of her life, she is finally telling her story.

Dolores Huerta dedicated her life to the dignity of vulnerable people. She organized. She marched. She endured surveillance, violence, and decades of exhaustion in service of fairness, equality, and justice for farmworkers. And all that time, she carried this. She kept it secret — for fear, it seems, of what speaking would cost. Fear of not being believed. Fear of damaging the movement. Fear of what exposure might mean for her children.

What Dolores Huerta deserved — what she has always deserved — was justice, mercy, and faithfulness. And the world, the world we've created, made her believe those things were not available to her. That is not simply a personal tragedy. That is an indictment of how we have built systems that protect power and demand silence from those it harms.

### **BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO HUNGER FOR RIGHTEOUSNESS**

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*Jesus said... Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are those who mourn. Blessed are the meek. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Blessed are the merciful.*

Do you hear what he is doing? He is not blessing the powerful, the certain, the stone-throwers. He is blessing the ones who know what it is to *need something*.

To be empty. To grieve. To hunger. And then — crucially — he blesses the merciful. Because the people who know their own need for grace are the ones most capable of extending it to others.

Justice and mercy are not opposites in the Beatitudes. They belong to each other. You cannot truly hunger for righteousness — for things to be *right* in the world — without also practicing mercy. Because righteousness without mercy only produces more crowds, with more stones. Unfortunately, that is the predominant view of Christians in America today.

If you have ever needed grace — and many of us will, in ways large and small — I hope you find a community that knows how to hold justice and mercy together. That doesn't require public humiliation as the price of belonging. That can look you in the eye and say: ***Neither do I condemn you. Go, and be made new!***

## TRANSFORMATION, NOT JUST ABSOLUTION

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The Rev. Lisle Gwynn Garrity writes about what Jesus actually does in this scene:

*“Transforming a lose-lose situation into one that centers the humanity and dignity of a woman caught in between. While the scribes and Pharisees appear to be focused on legalism, Jesus is focused on **transformation** — for the woman caught in adultery, but also for every person present at the spectacle... mercy, justice, and faithfulness should be at the heart of every rule.”*

— Rev. Lisle Gwynn Garrity

The question is never just: ***What does this person deserve?***

The deeper question is: ***What kind of community are we becoming?***

***What kind of people are we, every time we pick up a stone — or set one down?***

## AN INVITATION: LET THE STONE GO

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I want to close not with an argument, but with an invitation into your own imagination. Maybe, even close your eyes... if you feel comfortable doing so.

Imagine you are one of the ones gathered there that morning. The temple courts. The noise. The crowd pressing in. And in your hand — a cold, hard stone.

Maybe it's a stone of judgment you carry toward someone else. Maybe it's a stone of shame you carry toward yourself — shame that is earned, shame that was handed to you, or shame you've carried so long you've forgotten it was never yours to bear.

Imagine what it would feel like to loosen your grip. To release your fingers. To feel the weight leave your hand. And hear it land with “thud” on the ground.

Now imagine your name — or the name of someone you love — written in the sand. And imagine a hand that smooths the sand again. And all that was written there is wiped away...

This is the Good News Jesus embodies — not “cheap grace” that winks at harm, not justice without tenderness, not mercy without honesty — but the radical insistence that every human being carries the image of God, and *that image* is worth more than any stone in anyone's hand.

The world Dolores Huerta deserved. The world the woman in the temple courts deserved. The world we are called, together, to build. Day by day. Week by week. Year by year.

**Blessed are the merciful — for they shall receive mercy. *Amen.***