

Jesus Walks the Line
John 8:2-11
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The best preacher I've ever heard is a man named James Forbes. Dr. Forbes served as the pastor of Riverside Church in Manhattan for eighteen years, and under his leadership that church sustained a period of outstanding growth and community impact. Much of its success in the 1990s and 2000s is owed to Dr. Forbes's vision, courage, and drive.

I first heard him preach at a Wednesday night meeting that took place in an ornately sculpted basement room filled with sconces and marble pillars, something like a fine Italian crypt. I went with a professor named Doug Bailey and a group of students from Wake Forest Divinity School, and Dr. Bailey started the worship service with a gorgeous prayer, a prayer that was filled with beautiful natural imagery about moving water and its life-giving properties. It was clearly a prayer that Doug had worked on carefully, the kind of prayer that can take most of a morning to write. I was deeply moved, sitting in this stunning room and hearing Doug's stirring words.

Then Dr. Forbes spoke. He thanked Dr. Bailey eloquently and sincerely, then slid into the text of his sermon so smoothly that I didn't even realize his message had begun at first. I don't remember him using any notes, but he preached with depth and insight and passion. And while I think he preached for a while, it didn't feel like a long sermon. No one was checking their watches.

At one point, Dr. Forbes began to weave Doug's prayer into his sermon. At times, he quoted Dr. Bailey verbatim, and at times he simply used Doug's images to illustrate and enhance his own message. The depth and precision with which he referred to Doug's prayer was remarkable. Both the prayer and the sermon became richer and more meaningful to me because of how Dr. Forbes was able to twine them together. I was speechless, even breathless.

When the service ended and my breath returned, I asked Doug if he had shared his prayer with Dr. Forbes ahead of time. Doug's eyes twinkled, and he said, "No. Not a word."

I hesitate to tell you this story, because you are not going to get a sermon of the quality of Dr. Forbes's today—probably not any day unless we manage to get him here as a guest sometime. But it's a story that illustrates so well the value of carefully chosen and spoken word. Both Dr. Bailey and Dr. Forbes, in completely different ways, managed to connect the room with the Spirit simply through the words that they spoke.

It is the same thing we see in today's scripture reading.

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The story that kicks off John 8 is a disputed text in our Bible—that is, our oldest manuscripts of John don't actually include these verses. Scholars think that it has ended up here because it is, like John 7, another story where the Pharisees attempt to trap Jesus. It has remained included in our holy scripture in part because it tells such a striking narrative. The story is impossible to overlook.

In it, the Pharisees have taken a stance that they know Jesus will agree with: adultery is bad. But they have adopted this stance with such legalism and severity that there is no room for grace or mercy, and they also know that Jesus will want to show grace and mercy. They believe that they have Jesus trapped between the law which condemns adultery and his own teachings of benevolence.

It's easy to imagine the Pharisees plotting for this moment, hatching this plan. They have gone out of their way in the middle of the night, intruding upon this woman and her partner in order to catch her in the act. They have brought only the woman to Jesus, either because in addition to being enemies of Jesus they're also misogynistic or because they believe bringing just the woman will put Jesus in a tighter spot (or possibly both). You can almost see the oil dripping off of the Pharisees in this story, their beady eyes darting back and forth, maybe one of them licking his lips in anticipation. There are stories in our Bible where it is possible to read the Pharisees at least somewhat charitably, but this is not one of them.

They are even throwing the Law of Moses back at Jesus after he has quoted this Law in the previous chapter—you might remember that last week, Jesus used the example of Moses to defend his decision to heal on the Sabbath, so when the Pharisees return to the Law of Moses here, they are using Jesus' own tactics to stake a claim to the moral high ground.

It is, of course, not a claim that Jesus will allow them to keep. With one sentence, he dismisses their claim without bending on the Law. "Let any one of you who is without sin cast the first stone at her." It is a masterful demonstration of how to walk the line between grace and justice.

It's such a masterful demonstration that it's worth examining his sentence in careful detail.

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Jesus begins his defense not by acknowledging the Law or the woman, but by zeroing in on the accusers. His first words, directed at the Pharisees, are "Let any one of you." By doing this, he immediately shifts the focus from the woman and her adultery to the Pharisees themselves. As in John 7 when they asked the temple police to do their dirty work, the Pharisees have tried to separate themselves from the issues of trial and sin and guilt. They have brought this woman and thrust her into the spotlight; they are quoting Hebraic law; they are sarcastically referring to Jesus as "teacher." They are not inviting questions about their own lives but rather hoping that Jesus will get trapped while they remain unscathed.

Jesus will not have it. It is hugely significant that his first words are "Let any one of you." He is drawing the Pharisees into the fracas when they would prefer to be on the sidelines. He is pulling them into the trap alongside him.

And he is reminding them—and, through the text, reminding us—that the beginning of any form of judgment is self-awareness and self-evaluation. It is the bedrock of much of Jesus' teaching: pull out the log in your own eye before addressing the splinter in someone else's. It is not surprising that he launches his defense here with a condemnation of hypocrisy and a call to self-reflection.

Jesus continues to turn the Pharisees' argument back on themselves with his next words. They have approached him with unconditional language, trying to give Jesus no wiggle room. They have argued that adultery is wrong (it is) and that the Law commands death for someone caught

in adultery (more complex, but arguably true). They are, again, presenting things in absolutes, trying to trap Jesus by addressing an issue with language that has no escape.

Rather than trying to escape, Jesus simply turns the absolutes back on the Pharisees. He actually does this with his second word, “any,” but he especially does it with the phrases “without sin” and “first stone.” Like the Pharisees’ own accusations, these words do not leave any room to escape. They are part of the language of absolutism.

Jesus is doing two things here. First, he is furthering the need for self-examination, continuing to draw the Pharisees into their own trap and asking them to consider their own standing instead of someone else’s. Second, he is speaking the language of the Pharisees in order to communicate to them. It is what Jesus does throughout his time on Earth—he comes in human form that humanity might understand him, and he speaks with words that will resonate with his particular audience at any given time. Here, he speaks unflinchingly to a group that is unlikely to bend. It is a reminder to us that, if we truly wish to make our points resonate, we have to speak the language of those we wish to reach.

Only after he has done these things—after he has insisted upon the Pharisees’ self-reflection by speaking their own language of absolutism—does he return to the penalty itself. He does not bend here, still referring to the stoning with impressive directness. But he personalizes the penalty, making it clear that those who pronounce judgment will also need to execute it. The phrase “throw a stone” is active and individual.

Jesus concludes his defense by—finally—turning the attention back to the woman, saying “at her.” It is the apex of his defense. Whereas the Pharisees have used the woman as an object of sin, Jesus reinforces her humanity in this statement. Having demanded self-reflection, he now invites his opponents to look at this woman as a person, not as a verdict.

As he frequently does with his opponents, Jesus turns the Pharisees’ logic and structure completely upside down. They begin with a woman, move to her transgression and the penalty, and include themselves almost as an afterthought. Jesus requires that they start with themselves, then contemplate the penalty, and culminate by considering the woman. In the end, Jesus and the Pharisees never differ on their understanding of the Law...but by getting the order of things straight, Jesus causes the Pharisees to reconsider (at least temporarily) the rigidity and vindictiveness and lack of fairness or common sense of their own stance.

I feel like I could lead an entire retreat on this sentence, a different session focused on each clause, but you’ll have to be satisfied with a few paragraphs on each instead. Because the truth is that, as awesome as Jesus’ words are, it is more impressive what he does without them. It is more impressive what he conveys with his silence.

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When the iconic Dr. Forbes preaches, he says as much in his silence as he does with his words. Even when he’s already figured out what he’s going to say, he pauses to let his congregation see the gears turn just a little. There are times when his words come out rapidly, cascading one after the other, a torrent of images and pleas and exhortations that sweep up those listening and rush them away to another place...but there are also times when he lingers over every...single...word. And when he does this, he says as much in the pauses between words as he does with the words themselves. He conveys immense meaning through silence.

Jesus manages to do this repeatedly in this text in John. His words are so impressive that it is easy to jump straight to them, but Jesus himself does not jump straight to them. Instead, he refrains from speaking, bending down and writing something in the sand.

I am not alone in wondering what, exactly, Jesus wrote in the sand...but that's not really the point here. Most likely, Jesus does not write something mysterious and meaningful that is lost to us. Instead, his writing is a form of passive resistance, a refusal to engage in the Pharisees' cruel game.¹ His first attempt to teach them, to correct their behavior, is to show them how ridiculously they are acting by refusing to engage. Only after they press and pester him does he speak.

When it comes to issues of judgment and condemnation—when it comes to any kind of persuasion, really—it is remarkable how effective a communicator silence can be.

After he has spoken his one sentence, Jesus continues to engage in silence, kneeling down again and continuing to write in the dirt. He could have continued speaking—there are moments in our scripture when Jesus demonstrates a killer ability to berate those in the wrong—but he chooses not to do that here. Instead, he is silent...and his silence says all that the Pharisees need to hear.

I like to think that at least one or two of the Pharisees, as they exit the scene contritely, experience a true moment of conversion in this scene, leaving Jesus and the woman and thinking that maybe the Prophet from Galilee is onto something. I like to think that Jesus has the ability to change the minds and soften the hearts of even this sniveling and scheming group because of the magnitude of Jesus' transformative power...and because of how effectively Jesus makes his case. There is a lot of hope for how all of us present ourselves if we do so according to Jesus' model.

At this point, for this scene, the Pharisees are done. Jesus is not.

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The second time I heard Dr. Forbes preach was at First Baptist here in Raleigh. The sanctuary at FBC, like ours, has a pulpit up on an elevated dais. Unlike ours, there is a wooden rail that runs along the top edge of the dais, acting as a little bit of a guard to keep someone from misstepping. It's particularly helpful because FBC's dais is a little higher than ours.

When Dr. Forbes preached there, he had retired from Riverside and moved home to North Carolina. He was in his 80s, but he still had plenty of verve and spirit. At one point, he stepped aside from the pulpit and stepped up on the rail at the edge of the dais. He then began to hop on the rail, remarkably keeping his balance and simultaneously terrifying the leadership of First Baptist.

His point—as well as I can remember; I admit I was more focused on him not falling than I was on his words—his point was about the balance necessary to walk the line that Jesus lays before us. Today's scripture shows this balance as well as any story in our gospel does. After the Pharisees have departed, Jesus remains alone with the woman. He stands and addresses her, again using his words instead of his silence to strike his point home.

¹ O'Day, Gail. "The Gospel of John," *New Interpreter's Bible*, Volume 9. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 629.

His words are an emphatic embrace of mercy. The woman's guilt is never disputed, but Jesus nevertheless says to her, "Neither do I condemn you." It is a textbook example of grace.

But...these are not the last words he says to her. Jesus concludes these verses by saying, "Do not sin again." It is an unequivocal challenge, a clear directive to this woman. It is also a clear condemnation of the sin in question, even if he is refraining from condemning the woman herself.

Jesus' language here is a different form of absolutes. First, he exhibits *total* grace to her. Then, he demands perfection. In his final words in this scene, he demonstrates how the Pharisees should have exhibited their own principled mentality. There is room, in the teaching and kingdom of Jesus, to be demanding, even to speak with rigor...but it should be enveloped with a similarly demanding grace. This is how our words can connect the room to the Spirit.

Like Dr. Forbes on the dais rail, it is a hard line to walk. It is the line we find ourselves attempting to walk every day. Particularly in the current cultural climate, it is enormously challenging to find the right balance between demanding justice and demanding grace...but it is possible to do, and Jesus gives us the model to walk the line.

We constantly encounter others and instinctively judge without self-reflection, but Jesus insists that we start by examining our own lives first. We attempt to communicate our position to others without asking where they are coming from, without trying to speak their language. Jesus compels us to attempt to connect with others on their turf, in their words, at their comfort level. We falsely believe that our judgment does not impact others or ourselves personally, on the most basic human level...but Jesus teaches us that any judgment—even necessary judgments—will shape and mold us at our very cores.

And, perhaps more than anything, we attempt to shout or overrule others when we disagree, and Jesus reminds us that sometimes our best move is to refuse to engage, to speak through the silence...and when we do need to speak, to contemplate our words carefully. It is how he walks the line...and how we do as well.