

“Rock of Mercy”

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Continuing a series on the Gospel of John

John 7:53-8:11

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Then they all went home, but Jesus went to the Mount of Olives.

At dawn he appeared again in the temple courts. All the people were coming around him. He sat down and was teaching them. The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. Placing her in the midst of the group, they said to Jesus, *“Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. In the Law, Moses commanded us to stone such women to death. Now what do you say?”* They asked this to trap him, to bring a charge against him.

But Jesus stooped down and started to write on the ground with his finger. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, *“Let the one who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.”* Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground.

Those who heard Jesus began to slip away one at a time, the eldest first. Only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. Jesus straightened up and asked her, *“Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?”*

“No one, sir,” she said.

“Then neither do I condemn you,” Jesus declared. *“Go now and leave your life of sin.”*

John 7:53-8:11, New International Version (adapted)

We don't know her name. Let's call her "Tammy." Tammy is broken. And busted! Caught in the act! She's been cheating! They drag her to Jesus. Jesus will be Tammy's judge. (By the way, Jesus is our judge too. So as we go along, figure out if that is good news or not.)

The whole scene stinks.¹ For starters, Tammy is the only defendant. But by definition adultery is not Solitaire! What about her partner in crime? Did they let him go? Is this really about justice?

They drag Tammy in and set her up, centre-stage. Her guilt is at issue and her fate is being

¹ Dale Bruner says, "The whole set-up has an unpleasant odor." I'll say! Frederick Dale Bruner, [The Gospel of John, A Commentary](#) (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 505.

sealed, but her accusers are not concerned with her. She's just a prop in their drama. They are after Jesus.

They put Jesus on the judges' bench, expecting his will be a very short-term appointment. Either he will acknowledge her guilt, pass sentence, and end his good reputation for mercy and compassion. Or he will let her off, ignoring God's Law² and exposing himself as indifferent to sin. Whether Tammy lives or dies, Jesus will be finished.³

II

This is about *Sin*.⁴ It's not our favourite topic . . . except for the chocolate kind. "Sin" sounds like breaking some dusty rules designed to keep us from a good time. *Sin* gets pounded on to make folks feel bad.

If that is what we think sin is about, we miss the point. I like this definition: sin is *the human propensity to mess things up*.⁵ Sin messes up *good* things. God has wonderfully fashioned us so we can flourish in relationships, relationships that are delightful and good: our relationships with God, with all God's creation, with each other, and within ourselves. Sin breaks a relationship. Sin twists, abuses, manipulates, destroys. Instead of flourishing, our relationships flounder and flail. This "messing things up" does not just happen. We do it. Often on purpose. We stroll into Sin. Then we find we can't get away from it.

We try to deny Sin. We are good at that.

We try to re-brand Sin. We call them "mistakes." Adding two plus two, and getting five . . . that's a mistake. Cheating on the math test is a sin.

We try to cover up Sin. Where I lived in Northern Ontario, the roads were terrible. The deep cold heaves and sinks, tearing them up. It is tough on the suspension and the spine! Except in winter. The snow fills the holes and covers the cracks. Everything is smoothed

² See Leviticus 20:10 and Deuteronomy 22:22-24. Notice that both commands are clear that both parties to the adultery are to be punished equally.

³ Augustine summarized the trap facing Jesus like this: "if he shall approve her being stoned, he will not show his gentleness; if he consent to let her go, he will not keep righteous." Bruner, 509.

⁴ I follow the practice introduced to be by Fleming Rutledge, of capitalizing "Sin" to emphasize that it is one of the "powers" (along with Evil and Death). Sin is more than the sum-total of our various misdeeds. It is a Power that takes control over us, and away from us. In this sense, Sin is like a disease, while the particular "sins" we do are its symptoms or expressions. See Fleming Rutledge, [The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ](#) (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 35f.

⁵ Francis Spufford, [Unapologetic](#) (Londer: Faber & Faber, 2012), 27. Spufford's definition does not use the word "foul," but another four-letter word that begins with an "f." While I think his definition, with its shocking crassness, is more accurate to Sin's reality, I thought it better to paraphrase him!

over. We do that with Sin, pretending the damage is not there. But underneath, it is a mess and getting worse.

III

Sin fractures relationships, causing terrible harm. Tammy has sinned. What does Jesus do with Tammy?

He judges her. He finds her . . . guilty!

That's right. Jesus finds Tammy guilty. Otherwise, he would say, "*She did nothing wrong.*" Instead, he says, "*Go and sin no more.*" That only makes sense if Tammy is guilty.

But what about the not "casting the first stone" thing? We've turned that phrase to mean judging someone's behaviour. The same with "condemning." Look carefully, though. That's not what these mean in the story. "Casting the first stone" and "condemning" have nothing to do with judgement. (More on that in a bit.)

Tammy has fractured her marriage relationship. She has violated God's ways that make life flourish. She has sinned. Jesus does not deny it, re-brand it, nor cover it up. He exposes our sin, with a searching eye that pierces all our defenses. We don't get anything past him.

If the story stops here, it is truly terrifying. That's why we deny, re-brand and cover up. If the story stops here, the rocks will fly and Tammy will die. And we will be standing in line behind her.

IV

But by God's grace, Tammy's story continues.

Jesus crouches down to write in the sand. (Teachers did that before they had blackboards and projectors.⁶) What did he write? Many guesses, but it does not tell us. Maybe it does not matter. Instead, focus on the action itself. When Jesus stoops to write, what does everyone do?

They stop looking at Tammy.

⁶ N. T. Wright, John for Everyone, Part 1 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 113.

Everyone is looking at Jesus now! “What’s he writing?”⁷

Jesus stands up. We’ve already had the judgement. She is guilty. Now, the punishment. The Law calls for death by stoning. Unspeakably harsh. Though it does point to something true. If make Sin your boss, death will be your paycheck.⁸ It will destroy you.

But what’s the alternative? If God were to deny, re-brand or cover up Sin, there would be no justice, not truth-telling, no vindication for Sin’s victims. Don’t they matter? Their blood would cry from the ground, and receive no reply.

Jesus takes this very seriously. *“Pick up your rocks. Let’s have the one who has not sinned start us off.”* We’d rather focus on Tammy, but Jesus makes us look at ourselves. Accusers demand, “We need to take sin seriously!” By all means. Start with the sinner you know best . . . you.⁹ Jesus puts the accusers — which means all of us — into the prisoner box with Tammy. It’s crowded, and very uncomfortable. So they slip away.¹⁰

Notice, Jesus does not glare after them. This is not his mic-drop moment. He stoops and writes. He takes the focus off of them – and us — and pulls it back onto himself.¹¹

V

Remember I said that “condemning” and “casting a stone” are not about judgement. “Condemning” means deciding someone’s life is no longer fit for living, because of what they have done. “Casting stones” means killing them. They are about punishment.

But no one is left to punish her; none were qualified. No one can condemn her, without condemning themselves.

Sorry . . . one remains. One can cast a stone. One can condemn.

⁷ I am thankful to Dale Bruner for this wonderful insight into how the dynamics of the scene would have unfolded. See Bruner, 505.

⁸ Romans 6:23 says “the wages of sin is death.”

⁹ “He hasn’t said the law of Moses was wrong; only that, if we’re going to get serious about it, we should all find ourselves guilty.” Wright, 113.

¹⁰ The elders are the first to get it and leave. Dale Bruner wonders if this suggests “that the older we get the less sure we are of our purity. Youth can be cocky.” Bruner, 506.

¹¹ Bruner offers, “Jesus may now be trying to avert the crowd’s critical attention from the accused’s accusers and from their shame, just as he had earlier sought to protect the woman from her shame and shamers.” In this regard, he quotes Augustine: “But when the Lord had struck them with that shaft of justice, he deigned not to watch them collapse, but with his view turned away from them.” Bruner, 506.

But he does not.

Jesus never sinned. He lived always in perfect step with God's vision of life and flourishing. Only he has, so only he can pick up a stone. Only he can condemn without condemning himself.¹²

Jesus judges us . . . so he can forgive us. He judges us, to turn us around.¹³ He identifies what's wrong, to set us right. He diagnoses the illness, and Jesus himself is the cure.

Faced with sin, we look at others and accuse. Or into ourselves, and despair. But remember: Jesus drew the focus onto himself.

Jesus could condemn without condemning himself. Instead, by not condemning, he took the condemnation onto himself, and carried his cross. He who was not guilty willingly chose to bear the burden of our guilt. He who has the highest honour, gave himself into the depths of our shame. He who knew no sin, absorbed into himself its fierce power. He let sin do its worse to him, so we can live.

Looking at Tammy, he said: "*I do not condemn you. Go! Don't sin any more.*" Amid the stones, lying unused on the ground, she beheld Jesus, her Rock of mercy. And her story could continue.

The accusers had slipped away. Too bad. If they had stayed with Jesus, they would have seen their Rock of mercy too.¹⁴

And you?

¹² Matthew Henry wrote: "Christ was 'without sin,' and might cast the first stone; but though none more severe than he against sin, for he is infinitely just and holy, none more compassionate than he to sinners, for he is infinitely gracious and merciful, and this poor malefactor finds him so." Quoted in Bruner, 504.

¹³ The literal meaning of repentance (*metanoia*) is "to turn around."

¹⁴ Again quoting Henry: "[Jesus] aimed to bring, not only the prisoner to repentance, by showing her his mercy, but the prosecutors too, by showing them their sins. They sought to ensnare him; he sought to convince and convert them." Bruner, 509.