

HOLY VESSELS – FORGIVEN

Sermon written by Martha-Jean Fitch

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TEXT: John 8:1-11

How many of you here today would consider yourself a beach person? You dream of being on a beach – relaxing as you hear the waves of the water, go in and out? How many wish you were on a beach right now?

We who are land-locked – here in the Midwest – don’t really get to go to the beach all that often. I remember the first time we took our family to the beach, was back in 2000, when we went to a beach in Florida. Besides enjoying the beauty of the sunshine and water – we also enjoyed being beachcombers – looking for the treasures of seashells. We were thrilled when we could find a complete sand-dollar or a small conch shell. They were such beautiful examples of God’s creation.

But we have never had the opportunity to go beachcombing for beach or sea glass. Beach glass is glass found on shores of very large lakes – and genuine sea glass comes from the sea or the ocean. You can tell the difference in that sea glass tends to have a more frosted appearance and beach glass is clearer.¹

Last week, the Malecks brought us in some samples of their sea glass. I will let you know that their sea glass is authentic! Not fake like the glass you received in your Lenten bags. Much of the glass the Malecks have was found at Mount Desert Island in Maine.

Here’s what is interesting about beach and sea glass. Different from seashells, which are created by God....beach and sea glass really is garbage...broken glass. For instance, if you got a chance to look at the Malecks’ glass last week...there was a fragment from an amber-colored glass bottle of Clorox! Now how many of you remember having Clorox in a glass bottle? I sure don’t. Well, that’s because they stopped distributing glass bottles in 1962. In doing some research, I discovered that this particular fragment is probably from a 1940’s style of bottle! Isn’t that amazing? I just wonder who used this bottle back some 80 years ago and how did it end up in the Atlantic Ocean near Maine?

Those who collect beach and sea glass often become “archeologists” seeking out any markings or clues to the story of the original piece – like when and where it was created and for what purpose. And then try to put together the pieces of the story to find out how and why it was broken and thrown away and tossed aside as useless garbage. But what is so amazing is that God, through nature, is a great recycler – takes that broken piece of garbage and creates something beautiful – giving it a new life that is treasured by collectors and artists.

In a similar way, God, the Beachcomber, knows all about our lives – how we were created and how we became broken. God can take all the broken pieces of our life and make something beautiful and treasured in us. We are never too badly broken for God to reshape. He

loves us in spite of our imperfections and past mistakes and wants to restore us and give us a new life.

All throughout the Gospels, we find stories of broken people that Jesus reached out to – people that the world deemed worthless – damaged – and no better than garbage. But Jesus welcomed them and healed them and created something beautiful out of their lives. And such is the case with our story today from the Gospel of John. 8th chapter.

I invite you to get your Bibles out and turn to the of the Gospel of John in the New Testament. And follow along as we hear Aaron Barton read to us verses 1-11 from John 8.

8 Jesus returned to the Mount of Olives, ² but early the next morning he was back again at the Temple. A crowd soon gathered, and he sat down and taught them. ³ As he was speaking, the teachers of religious law and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in the act of adultery. They put her in front of the crowd. ⁴ “Teacher,” they said to Jesus, “this woman was caught in the act of adultery. ⁵ The law of Moses says to stone her. What do you say?” ⁶ They were trying to trap him into saying something they could use against him, but Jesus stooped down and wrote in the dust with his finger. ⁷ They kept demanding an answer, so he stood up again and said, “All right, but let the one who has never sinned throw the first stone!” ⁸ Then he stooped down again and wrote in the dust. ⁹ When the accusers heard this, they slipped away one by one, beginning with the oldest, until only Jesus was left in the middle of the crowd with the woman. ¹⁰ Then Jesus stood up again and said to the woman, “Where are your accusers? Didn’t even one of them condemn you?” ¹¹ “No, Lord,” she said. And Jesus said, “Neither do I. Go and sin no more.”

As we begin to look closer at this story, do you notice anyone who is missing in this story? The Pharisees and the scribes have brought a woman caught in the act of adultery before Jesus. But where is the man who was caught in the act with her? The law clearly states in Leviticus and Deuteronomy that *both* parties involved are to be stoned.²

We don’t know where the man was. But it could be that the Jewish leaders really didn’t care where the man was – and really didn’t care all that much about this woman. Rather they were just using her as a pawn to entrap Jesus. Verse 6 says it this way: *“They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him.”* This woman was merely a piece to play in the game they waged against Jesus.

If Jesus responded by saying that she should be stoned to death, He would “lose forever the name He had gained as a friend of sinners – full of love and mercy.” But if he said that she *should* be forgiven, he would be in violation of the laws that clearly states that a couple caught in the act of adultery should be stoned to death. How in the world would he answer *this* question? “This was the trap in which the Scribes and Pharisees sought to catch Jesus.”³

So how does Jesus respond? Look at verse 6. *“Jesus stooped down and wrote with his finger on the ground.”* Why do you think He did that? And what do you think He wrote?

Could it be that Jesus was stalling for time – giving Him time to think of what the best answer would be? Or was He being gracious to the woman who stood before Him – diverting the eyes of the angry mob away from her and on to Him?

If you think about it, the finger that was writing in the sand is the very finger that wrote on the stone tablets on Mount Sinai, the Ten Commandments.⁴ Maybe He was writing out the Commandments. Or, as some have suggested that while the scribes kept demanding an answer, Jesus may have been confronting the men by writing down *their* sins. James beat his wife last week, David cheated on his taxes, Joseph stole from his neighbor, Jacob slept with Mark's wife." No one knows for sure what he wrote...but I think it must have been something that was convicting to the people that were there.

We read that Jesus stood up and said to those gathered: *"Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her."* All of the sudden, the accusers became silent. And one by one, each man threw his stone down and walked away. At that moment at least, they seemed to have realized that no one has the right to judge and tear down another – for we are all sinners! They had come to trap and shame Jesus – but themselves were the ones leaving in shame.

Oh – how often are we like those Pharisees. So easily we pick up the rocks to gossip, to condemn, to judge. We put ourselves above others, thinking of ourselves better than the other. I believe Jesus is calling us to put down the rocks and pick up the grace of God. Jesus said, ³⁶*"You must be compassionate, just as your Father is compassionate."* ³⁷*"Do not judge others, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn others, or it will all come back against you. Forgive others, and you will be forgiven,"* (Luke 6:36-37). We are to follow in the footsteps of Jesus and be filled with His grace and love. And that means that we can't be a rock thrower, hurting people by our gossip and our slander. Instead of condemning and hurting a person with our rock throwing, we need to offer mercy, just like Jesus did for the woman in our story today.

What I find interesting in this story is that Jesus didn't just stoop down to write in the dust just once – but he actually stooped down a second time. Look at verse 8. Jesus stands up, talks to the accusers – and then stoops down again and writes with His finger. And one by one all the accusers walk away. Now what was Jesus writing this second time? If the first message was towards the accusers - was this second time a message for the woman – or just a reminder to Himself?

We don't know what He wrote. But perhaps ... maybe as He writes in the dust, the words from Psalm 103 came to mind:

"The Lord is compassionate and merciful, slow to get angry and filled with unfailing love. He will not constantly accuse us ... He does not punish us for all our sins. He has removed our sins as far from us as the east is from the west."

The LORD is like a father to His children, tender and compassionate to those who fear him. For He knows how weak we are; He remembers we are only dust."

Filled with compassion and love, Jesus stands and offers His hand to the woman now covered in dust and dirt. Jesus pulls her up and helps her stand. Beautiful things come from the dust. Her tears fall from her eyes, leaving little trails on her face through the dust, and Jesus says, *“Where are your accusers? Didn’t even one of them condemn you?”* ¹¹ *“No, Lord,” she said. And Jesus said, “Neither do I. Go and sin no more.”*

Think of this: Jesus – the only one who was *without* sin and had the *right* to condemn – instead gave mercy.

What it must have been like for this woman to hear these words from Jesus? Can you feel the enormous burden of guilt and shame fall from her shoulders? And what a huge change to have all of the sudden been given love and life – where minutes before, all you could feel was hatred and the threat of death.

I really wish we had more information on this woman. We never know her name – and after this brief incident in her life, we never hear about her again. What do you think she did with this new life that she had been given? I often wondered if she joined the many other women who followed Jesus, along with the disciples. Or maybe she decided to help other women who were deemed sinful or unclean, turn their lives around and shared with them the grace and mercy of Jesus. We don’t know what exactly happened to her – but one thing I think we can be certain of: she didn’t give up and stay broken and defeated in the dust of her mistakes. Rather she got up and walked with new life and new hope – a holy vessel, healed, loved and forgiven!

I don’t know the place where you find *yourself* today. Maybe you find you are among the accusers, who have so easily fallen into the trap of blaming and condemning and judging. We certainly are living in a time in our society that has become very divided and polarized – and often people are putdown, bullied and even demonized. If you find that you are being pulled in that direction all too easily – turn to God and lay that burden down. Know that all of us are sinners, standing in the need of grace. Ask God for forgiveness and for a new heart of love.

Perhaps today you find yourself as broken and hopeless as the woman in our story. You have failed and made mistakes and broken promises. The road you are walking on is rough and full of pain and regret. Maybe you even feel like there is no way God could ever forgive you. If so, hear this good news - Jesus loves you dearly and is reaching out His hand to you to redeem you. God is a God of second chances and amazing grace. He can take the broken pieces of your life and bring healing and hope.

Turn your eyes upon Jesus – look deeply into His eyes of compassion and love. And watch – He’s stooping to leave a message for you, writing not in the sand – but with His arms outstretched upon a cross – saying, “Father, forgive them.” He took on our condemnation so that we could live! Amazing love – amazing grace!

LET US PRAY!

RESOURCES

¹Wikipedia, “Sea Glass”, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sea_glass

²Life Application Bible, page 1838.

³William Barclay, The Gospel of John, p. 2.

⁴Fairchild, Mary. "The Woman Caught in Adultery Bible Story Study Guide." Learn Religions, Aug. 25, 2020, learnreligions.com/woman-caught-in-adultery-700206.