

Session 11

May 10, 2020

Unit 2: Jesus Encounters . . .

The Woman Caught in Adultery

Our future is more important to Jesus than our past.

The Word

John 7:50—8:11

Engage the Word

NICODEMUS—A VOICE OF REASON

John 7:50-52

Nicodemus plays an important role at several places in the Gospel of John. First, this man is identified as a leader of the Jews who came by night to discuss questions about spiritual birth with Jesus (John, chapter 3). In the present passage, Nicodemus' voice calls for justice, urging the Jewish council (the Sanhedrin) to first carefully hear from Jesus before bringing condemnation upon Him. Nicodemus provided a voice of reason. Later, Nicodemus helped Joseph of Arimathea with burial preparations of Jesus' body (19:38-40). The relationship of Nicodemus to Jesus began with one who had questions about Jesus' teaching. Then, later, Nicodemus defended Jesus before the Sanhedrin. Finally, by participating in burial preparations for Jesus, he appears to be a disciple of Jesus and a member of the early Christian community. John, with his inclusion of Nicodemus at key points in his gospel, describes a journey of faith. What began as a limited faith, became a stronger faith, and moved finally to a significant and deep faith. John demonstrates people at different stages of faith. John wrote so people would move toward Jesus.

TEACHERS AND PHARISEES—VOICES OF ACCUSATION

John 7:53—8:6

The voices of the Jewish religious leaders sound sharp tones of accusation. They strenuously accused the woman of adultery. But the man who violated the ethical standard is absent from the

proceedings. According to Leviticus 20:10, both the man and the woman who committed adultery were liable for the death penalty. It becomes quickly apparent that the teachers of the law and the Pharisees were not seeking a full resolution of the charges against the woman. They were, instead, trying to trap Jesus, depending on how He answered. The land was under Roman control, and that included the matter of capital punishment. But the law of the Hebrew scriptures continued as the Jewish standard. If Jesus spoke in sympathy with the accusers that the death penalty was to be enacted, He likely would have been in difficulties with Rome. If He deferred to the Romans and their legal control, then He could have been charged as opposing Moses (the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Hebrew Bible). Either position placed Jesus in a hazardous situation. Accusing voices that day were silenced by Jesus' quiet resistance to their verbal challenges.

THE WOMAN AND HER VOICE

John 8:7-11

For most of the time the woman was silent. Although a key character in the story, she has no voice. Only later, when Jesus addressed her directly, did she dare to speak. Maybe she remained quiet in the presence of her accusers because of the way they were using her as a “tool” to attack Jesus. Or, perhaps her shame paralyzed her speech. Her acts had made silence her inevitable portion. Shame might have driven her to silence. However, it seems clear that only Jesus gave her an opportunity to speak.

There is irony in the scene. This challenge to Jesus surely took place in the Court of Women, else the group of men would have chosen a different place for the encounter. It was a place that this accused woman was permitted to be, and to speak. But the harsh spirit of the accusers, and that she had indeed violated the Mosaic law, left her with no real defense. Better to be silent.

She never denied the charge of adultery, and Jesus' words indicate that she had, in fact, lived in sinful ways. It is worth noting that there is no clear indication that she repented. Jesus did not declare her forgiven, but He did command her to make a new start, to leave her old life of sin. Jesus did say she was not being condemned. Her mob of accusers had sheepishly left the area. Neither they, nor Jesus, pressed for condemnation upon her.

JESUS—A VOICE OF AUTHORITY

The impact of Jesus on the Jerusalem crowds caused the chief priests and Pharisees to seek to silence Him. But Nicodemus, and surely others also, wanted to hear Him, and hold off on any condemnation. While Jesus moved around the temple courts, it is as if He was continually on trial by individuals and groups. Charges were brought, testimony given, decisions made. Amidst these disruptions Jesus still took frequent opportunity to teach “all the people” as a rabbi with authority. He taught while seated (Matthew 5:1-2; Luke 4:20). That was one way a rabbi would then have conveyed his authority.

How did Jesus “speak” in the face of such intrusion upon His time and space? He listened, apparently respectfully, then wrote in the dust. We don't know what He wrote. Later traditions

developed that Jesus wrote specific sins of individuals, which caused people to quietly drift away rather than pretend they had no sin on their own record. Jesus’ “voice” spoke in His actions, and in His silence. He wrote in the dust a second time. His authoritative voice then waited for the accusers to all go away. Only then did He direct His words to the woman. With the accusers now gone, Jesus pointed out that she no longer had any who were condemning her. Jesus also did not condemn her, but left her with a prophetic challenge—“leave your life of sin.”

Did You Know?

Consider John 20:30-31 as an attempted explanation of why John selected different parts of the remembered traditions about Jesus than had Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Some of these stories were embraced as deserving of a place in the canon. In the case of the account of the woman caught in adultery, just where to locate the encounter in a manuscript was a more difficult challenge. No gospel author could have included everything about Jesus. But all four evangelists no doubt wrote to call people to faith.

Think About It

There is no indication here that mercy extended is a license to sin! Grace is never increased or exalted by multiplication of sin. Rather, the Christ of the Cross makes it possible for [people] to abstain from the sins which He commands [people] to forsake. For this woman there was now an open door. [Beacon Bible Commentary: John/Acts (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1965), 104.]

Reflect

What is the message, or messages, you received from today’s story?

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