

HEARTBEATS Staying Connected 7/4/2022

Dear Friends in Christ,

ONE AT ONE – *Every day this week beginning on Tuesday, July 5 you are encouraged to pray for one minute at one o'clock. This week, pray countries facing political and civil unrest including Ukraine, Afghanistan, Cuba, Haiti, Myanmar, Israel, and Palestine. Ask God to guide leaders into just actions that protect their people and uphold the dignity of all. Pray for peace and an end to violence.*

The story of the woman caught in adultery from the eight chapter of the Gospel of John is filled with nuances—things that we miss, as I've said before, because we often aren't familiar with the details of that time period culturally, ethnically, and religiously. It is a fairly well-known story. Jesus is in Jerusalem in the Temple courtyard when a group of Pharisees and teachers of the law bring to Him a woman who has been caught in the very act of adultery. The Pharisees and teachers of the law are like religious lawyers who have spent their lives studying and interpreting the scriptures and their meaning. They also like to let others know when they are breaking the law so that, at the very least, they will have to go make the proper sacrifice for their sin, and at the very most, be shamed for their failure to live the way God expected them to live. Or at least the way the Pharisees and teachers of the law think God expected them to live. So, when they bring this woman to Jesus, they are quick to remind Him that, "our scriptures say that this woman should be put to death." And they want to trap Jesus by asking Him what to do with her. Even though they've already said what should be done with her. Now, if Jesus says she should be put to death, He will lose favor with all the people who have come to like Him. And if He says to let her go, He will be in disagreement with God's law. It's a no-win situation.

But here's where some of those nuances come in. First, while they are correct that the law says that she should be put to death, they have overlooked the fact that it says that both people, the man and the woman who were caught in adultery, should be stoned until they are dead. Where's the guy? It's pretty hard for someone to commit adultery all by his- or herself. Yet, they only bring her. Did the guy somehow get away and they only caught hold of this woman? Was he one of their buddies, so they let him slip out the backdoor? Is there some other reason they want Jesus to deal with just her? We aren't told, but it is a curiosity in this story.

Second, rather than answering them right away, Jesus squats down and starts writing in the dust on the Temple courtyard floor. If you back up a bit to the seventh chapter of John, you'll learn that Jesus and His disciples are in Jerusalem for the Feast of the Tabernacles. The Feast of the Tabernacles was the last of the seven great festivals of the year for the Jews. It came in late fall, just before winter when, hopefully, the rains would come and water the crops so that you would have a harvest in the spring. And the Pharisees and the teachers of the law during the past eight days of this festival have been teaching about the spiritual significance of water. And one of the most important passages they've been teaching about is Jeremiah 17:13 which says, "*Lord, You are the hope of Israel; all who forsake You will be put to shame. Those who turn away from You will be written in the dust...*" Now what was that last line? "Those who turn away from You will be written in the dust..." And what did Jesus do in this situation? He bends down and starts writing with His finger in the dust. We aren't told what Jesus writes, but I've often wondered if it might not be names. Their names. Just before He confronts them about their behavior—their judgment of this woman who really should only be judged by God,

and how they should give a bit more thought to their own sin. And they, now shamed by their own sin, turn and walk away.

You can read this story as a wonderful lesson about how we should be less judgmental and that we shouldn't throw stones, figuratively or literally, when people mess up because we mess up, too. You can read it as an encouragement to extend grace to others because, if the situation were reversed, we'd want them to offer grace to us. That's a wonderful, powerful message and we all could use more grace and less stone throwing in our world today. But this story also wants us to see that Jesus is challenging the power structure of His day that has become corrupt—controlled by politics and the pursuit of power. This story encourages us to follow Jesus' example of courage and resolve to stand up and say, "What you are doing is wrong and I for one will not let you continue without naming what you are doing." This is the example that Jesus sets before us when we see injustice and abuse of power and realize that it is neither right nor what God desires. And it is in these moments that God calls us to follow the example of Jesus to confront such inequity by speaking out or protesting or writing letters or taking whatever peaceful action we can to overturn the wrong and to work for the dignity and honor of those who are being abused. It is not easy. It cost Jesus His life. But it is, nevertheless, what God calls us and desperately wants us to do.

In Christ's love,
Pastor Jeffrey