

‘Let anyone among you...’: Sin, Violence, and Grace in John 8 (Jesus and the Woman Caught in Adultery)

Will Moore

Lectionary readings:

2 Corinthians 5.20b - 6.10

John 8.1-11

Sermon

‘Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone.’

In the name of the Father, of the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Sin has become a bit of dirty word, I think, especially to those outside of the church (Moore 2022, pp. 32-3). Since the sixth century theologian Augustine, it has become somewhat associated with guilt and shame. We have defined ourselves by this nature – not just that we are sinful, which is not *untrue*, but that we should (primarily) be ashamed and feel guilty of it. We have warped our self-understanding into a form of self-hatred and self-flagellation. Rather than God’s great Gifts, we have perceived ourselves as God’s greatest disappointments.

There is something helpful about widening our scope here, broadening our horizon. Violence and sin are not just about individual acts – an insult, an attack, a hurtful exchange – but about the broader systems, structures, and cultures of power we find ourselves within (Moore, forthcoming). There is something sinful, for example, about the way in which minorities are treated – how our structures and cultures let us scapegoat those who look and seem like ‘the Other’. There is something sinful about how groups are judged and blamed for the state of society, like we are in some sort of moral spiral that is down to only a certain ‘type’ of people’s existence. There is something sinful about a cultural norm that prioritises violence as a means for justice and war as a political tool.

In reality, as offensive as it might be to the modern ear, sin is everywhere. The world is sinful. *We are sinful*. That is inescapable. When we acknowledge our mortality and our finitude, the fact that – as humans – we will always try and try, and probably fail and fail – we recognise that there is something about our nature that means we will never be perfect. And that’s OK.

But that’s not the whole story. Sin is not the ‘defining truth about humanity’ (Robinson-Brown 2021, p. 30). Trauma theologian Serene Jones says that sin and grace ‘exist together in the complex matrix of violence (2019, p. 38). As Paul writes in Romans, where sin increases, grace abounds all the more (Rom. 5.20). We do not have one without the other. And in the face of the world’s sin, as well how we sin ourselves *and* how we are sinned against, we need to understand the ever-flowing, ever-outpouring, always-offering love and grace of Jesus Christ.

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It's not a stretch to see how these ideas bring us to our Gospel reading. In John's account of Jesus and the Adulterous Woman (John 8), as she is usually known, we see all these dynamics of sin – as well as abounding grace – at play. The scribes and the Pharisees, groups of important Jewish men, bring this woman over; John says they '[made] her stand before all of them' (v. 3). Their collective religious, political, and social power is exercised against this woman. Already, she has been thrown into a den of lions, ready to be judged and blamed. Of course, she too had sinned through the act of adultery – but where is the other partner here? Why is the man not equally to blame? The structures of power are stacked against her.

As the question arises from these men about what to do with this woman, suddenly the escalating tension is... interrupted. Jesus does not answer their questions. He does not entertain their test. He bends over. He draws their attention to him and writes in the sand. The movements of Jesus are slowing. You can only imagine how everyone must have paused, puzzled, watching and waiting to see what Jesus was doing.

And we don't know, do we? The writing in the sand has puzzled theologians and biblical scholars for years, with a variety of possible answers. But I like the idea explored by biblical scholar Helen Paynter (2020, pp. 121-3), who says that by drawing in the sand, Jesus averts the male-gaze of the Pharisees and scribes. Their looks of judgement and disdain, their piercing eyes, no longer look on this woman who is being publicly shamed. The power dynamics are diffused and the trial is disrupted. Instead, whilst Jesus distracts them with his *gradual* bending over, his *slow* writing in the sand, this woman is *freed* of the shame imposed by these powerful men upon her vulnerable body.

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Jesus eventually answers their questions; not by explaining or justifying why (or why not!) this woman is guilty. Instead, he turns the attention back on these Jewish men. He asks *them* if *they* have not sinned, then *they* could throw the first stone. In reality, Jesus articulates what I have been getting at: there is nothing, no one, who is without sin. That fact is inescapable. But Jesus' response is what demonstratively shows the existence of grace, the outpouring of Love, that comes from Christ. *Forgiveness*. God never gives up, never stops giving, never stops freeing us. Our lives are everchanging within the Love of God.

We are reminded of that today, on Ash Wednesday. As we are marked with the sign of the cross on our foreheads, and as the words are said, we are reminded that we are dust and to dust we shall return. *Turn away from sin and be faithful to Christ*. That statement doesn't deny sin, it doesn't reject its existence. It shows we have a choice – to keep our eyes on sin and death, or on the person of Jesus Christ who redeems us.

As our reading from 2 Corinthians said, we look as if we are *dying* but we are *alive*. Despite – actually, *because of* – these mortal bones and our fleshiness and our bloodiness, we live a life striving for our Saviour Jesus Christ and the grace that only he gives. Our whole created self – our entire body-soul of *being* – is offered to Christ in its fragility, and beauty, and wonder. So, whilst this world is full of sin, and our bodies are finite and brittle, we encounter ever-increasing grace *through* our bodies, *through* our experiences, *through* this fleshy, mortal life we live – what may seem degenerative and dying is actually what gives goodness and new life. Within the complex matrix of power and sin that entangles us all, we see ever more clearly God's grace.

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The question still remains of whether Jesus wrote anything of importance in the sand. Surely he wasn't just scrawling, scribbling, in a desperate struggle for people's attention. It must have been something worth writing, something worthy of being seen and read. Perhaps it was a statement for the Jewish men. Maybe it was something about the woman. Maybe it was a message *for* the woman herself.

It begs us to wonder what Jesus would write for us? What is the message Jesus is taking the time to write on the sands of *your* heart today? In our fast-paced lives, perhaps when we are caught in the crossfire of arguments of blame and judgement, where do we see Jesus slowing us down and showing us another way? When we feel the heaviness of sin on our hearts, what is Jesus doing in our lives and in the lives of others to lift those burdens? Amongst the noise of the world, what is it that God seeks of you?

Today we remember all that we are – quite literally, we are reminded that we are flesh, and body, and blood, and, yes, dust. But in this, *our* being, we encounter God. In this, *our* sin, we find grace. In this, our world of despair, we find an eternal Love that holds us so closely. We are invited to remember all this and turn to Christ – the Christ who became *this* flesh, *this* blood, *this* being. In all that we are, we find God, and – in the most awesome act of grace – God always finds us.

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Amen.

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