

Sermon- Turning a Trap into a Triumph

Scripture: John 8:1-11

Sunday, July 15, 2018

We are now into the 8th chapter of John. The physical location of Jesus has not changed much in all of chapter 7 and for the rest of chapter 8 and beyond. Jesus does a lot of his heavy teaching right in the heart of Jerusalem. Now today's passage has a few special features that I want to address. You see many of the Bibles will have a note saying, this story of the "Woman caught in adultery" is not present in the oldest and best manuscripts. What does that mean? In fact some of a great commentaries refuse to comment on this story because they don't believe it was written by John. To understand what is going on, I want to make a quick note on how the books of the Bible are put together. Well, anytime you and I pick up a Bible, we are picking up an English translation. You also know that the English translation of the New Testament comes from the Greek original. But you see the Greek original is not one book. When you look at the Greek, there are 26 different manuscripts that contain some part of the Gospel of John dating from the 2nd century to the 7th century. These manuscripts have small differences. There is a group of scholars who take the original manuscripts and combine them into one document with lots of footnotes specifying the differences. This is called the Greek apparatus. And this Greek apparatus that then gets translated into different languages. When the scholars see variations, one of the rules they follow is to give precedence to the older manuscripts. And we have about 4 manuscripts from the 2nd to 4th century that are considered the most reliable. This story is not in those manuscripts. Our story comes from a 5th century manuscript called Codex Bezae. The writing style of this particular story is also very different from the rest of John. What scholars think happened here is that some of the early scribes omitted this story from the other manuscripts because they thought it conveyed a lax attitude on Jesus' part towards

adultery. But the story was passed down through the generations orally till it got written down in the 5th century in Codex Bezae. But I think the fact that we still have this incident from Jesus' life even though many important people did not think it should be recorded, speaks to the power of this story. And that is what we are going to explore today.

Well, when we ended chapter 7 you will remember that the Pharisees were telling the guards that the people are falling for Jesus because they were ignorant of the law. They themselves on the other hand were considered the experts on the Law of Moses. And if they were experts they thought they could use their deep knowledge to set up a legal trap for Jesus. And this is how they do it. They bring this woman who was caught in the act of committing adultery to Jesus and with her standing there they ask Jesus with a deceptively respectful tone, "teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. According to Moses she would have to be stoned to death. What would you do?" Here is the trap. If Jesus said she should be let go, that would mean Jesus was disregarding the sexual purity laws laid out in Duet 22. And if they could show that Jesus had no regard for Mosaic law, then they thought Jesus would lose credibility as a teacher in Israel. On the other hand, if Jesus said stone her, now that raises another problem. Because the procedure was that the witnesses had to throw the first stones and then all the gathered crowd would throw stones after that. But from a Roman perspective, that would mean Jesus was inciting mob violence and the Romans would get on that so fast and put him to death so as to make him an example and send a strong message to the public that this was unacceptable behavior. Either way the Pharisees thought they had Jesus.

What Jesus does in this situation is incredible. Jesus baffles all the onlookers by bending down and writing something on the ground with his fingers. Now there is a lot of speculation about what he wrote. Some say, maybe he was writing, where is the man who was with her? We don't know. And it was not recorded for us because that detail

was not important to the story. What is important is the fact that he was writing something with his finger. Why is that important? Remember the Pharisees were trying to tell the guards that the people were illiterate. Well Jesus could have been communicating to the people that he is not illiterate. But actually it goes beyond that. Remember how the Israelites were given the law by the finger of God writing on tablets of stone? Now picture this scene. Standing there near the temple, these Pharisees think they can trap Jesus with the law of Moses. Jesus bends down, and simply enacts the giving of the law by his own hand to these people.

Then he gets up and tells them, “let him who is without sin, throw the first stone” and then he returns to writing something in the dirt. This was a startling response completely turned the tables on the Pharisees who thought they had Jesus checkmated. You see the Pharisees were trying to trap Jesus with sexual purity laws of Deut 22. Jesus on the other hand responds with an allusion to Deut 17:7 which says that when you are stoning someone for adultery, the witnesses must be the first ones to throw the stones. After that, all the other people can join in. So Jesus was taking Deut 17:7 and giving it a twist that cannot be challenged even by the experts. The Pharisees are the ones who are stumped at this point. Maybe there were no witnesses there, but certainly there was no one who could claim to be sinless. And Jesus was saying, if you are going to accuse someone, make sure that you cannot be accused of sin yourself. That statement had the crowd in a fix. In that culture, age was greatly respected and it was the elders who would be expected to take the initiative. But if you don't feel comfortable proclaiming yourself sinless, you might as well leave. And if the older people are not going to do it, the younger people are not going to stick their necks out and they decide to leave too. And with the older people peeling off, the moment fizzles out. In the end everybody leaves except for two people, Jesus and this woman.

Now Jesus turns to the woman and asks her two questions, “woman, where are they?” and “Has no one condemned you?” Of course these are rhetorical questions. Jesus

already knows the answers. But Jesus wanted her to recognize something by his questions. Even these hardened Pharisees developed some awareness of their own sins and were unable to condemn her. When she acknowledges that there was no one there anymore, Jesus proceeds to tell her these words, “then neither do I. Go and sin no more”. You see Jesus first demolished the trap set for him, turned the tables on the Pharisees, got them convicted of their sins and then turned to do the same with the woman. In two phrases, neither do I and go and sin no more, he had enabled her to both be convinced of sin and given a chance to repent and turn her life around.

You see the Pharisees had tried to trap Jesus with classic law dilemma, by pitting mercy against Justice. Jesus overcame the trap by demonstrating that you could have both mercy and justice. By bringing about conviction of sin, Jesus was upholding the standard of the law and executing justice. By giving the woman an opportunity to repent and turn her life around he was exercising mercy and demonstrating the ultimate intent of the law.

By causing both justice and mercy to prevail, Jesus turned what was meant to be a trap into a moment of triumph. This was for Jesus a small foreshadowing of what he was about to do on a much grander scale on the cross.

But I want to just bring it back to us. How is this passage instructing us? I believe this passage has two important takeaways for us. The first thing is that in our dealings with this world we have to be shrewd as a snake and innocent as a dove. Remember, the world is always trying to suck us in, trap us into saying or doing something we will regret. This is one challenge I constantly face as a parent. In spite of the fact that I have the most amazing kids in the world, there are times on any given day when I am really pushed by one of my kids. As I was praying about this I realized that the enemy is trying to get me to do one of two things, give up or just lose my temper and do something I would regret. And I prayed about this and determined that I am going to depend on

God's Spirit to guide me on the narrow path so that I would not fall on either side. It worked by friends. In the end I realized that it was the enemy trying to trap me and I was not going to fall for his traps. God helped me find a way through and he will help you find a way through the traps that the enemy tries to put in your way as well. Be as shrewd as a serpent and innocent as a dove.

There is another take away from this passage. Sometimes the test you will face in your life will be situations where specifically you will be pushed to choose between mercy and justice. We face this at different levels. In recent years, at the denominational level the homosexual issue has caused such a turmoil that it has split the church. Part of the church wants to be on the side of justice and upholding the laws of the Bible and part of the church wants to show mercy. The problem is, those two parts can't seem to come together. At the same time, it is not an easy fix at all. Because conviction of sin can only come from God. And Repentance and transformation are the ways we cooperate with what God is doing in our lives. We may not be able to do much at the denominational or national levels but we have to ask God for His spirit to bring both mercy and justice into our lives like only he can do.

We face the justice-mercy dilemma in our church when dealing with our Venture Club kids all the time right? When we have a kid who is disruptive, do we lay down the law by asking the kid to leave and lose out on possible life impact or do we show mercy and let the kid stay and send the message that rules and right and wrong don't matter? Well, friends there is no easy answer but I can tell you this. Well you are faced with this dilemma, it is God's have of telling us to pray and let his Spirit work in the situation and in our own lives so that both mercy and justice will prevail and God's presence be made known to all.

In our own lives, we usually want justice when someone has wronged us but want mercy when we have wronged someone else. How can we turn this trap of choosing one or the other into triumphant life where both justice and mercy prevail?

In 2006 in Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania, a man entered an Amish school house, took a bunch of schoolgirls hostage and shot and killed 5 of them before taking his own life. Why this incident is so famous though is because the parents of these 5 girls were able to forgive the killer and even help the killer's family. When someone does harm to your family what you want them to experience is justice but you need God to show you mercy. In this case by extending forgiveness, the sin was being acknowledged but by showing mercy we are opening the way for transformed hearts and a great witness to God's presence in the situation.

In this world my friends, many traps await us just like it did for Jesus, our Lord. But when we are faced with these traps, remember that these are opportunities to depend a little more on him so that we can come through victorious and transform a trap into a triumph. May each of us be led into many such triumphs over the evil one in His name and for His glory. Let us pray.