

Voices: The example of the adulterous woman

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Jesus said, "For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him" (John 3:17).

The story of the woman caught in adultery demonstrates just that. Jesus came not to condemn the world, but to give light in the midst of darkness. He came not to abolish the law, but to fulfill it.

If no one else understood Jesus that day, if no one else saw his light, the woman in the story did.

The setting

Sukkot, or the Feast of Booths, is one of the most joyous of Israel's feasts. People from all over Israel gather in Jerusalem to celebrate.

Near the end of the festival recorded in John's Gospel, Jesus was at the temple court teaching in the early morning. All of a sudden, there was a commotion coming toward Jesus. Pharisees and teachers of the law were bringing to him a woman caught in adultery.

We don't know a lot about this woman. There is no indication she was a prostitute. Maybe she was one of the drunken partygoers who got caught up in the moment. Maybe she was an unhappy married woman caught cheating on her husband.

The Pharisees and scribes must have picked her out and spied on her and her lover. As daybreak burst over Jerusalem, they grabbed the woman, but her lover was able to get away. She must have felt confused, angry and

humiliated as she scrambled for something to cover herself.

These religious people exposed her sin and humiliation. Not only that, according to their law, they already had condemned her, without a fair trial and in front of everyone.

Testing Jesus

They brought this woman and made her stand before everyone there. They interrupted Jesus, saying: “Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. In the Law, Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now, what do you say?” (John 8:4).

Their question is a brilliant one. In a way, it was a lose-lose situation for Jesus. If he said to stone her, then they could go to the Romans and say, “Here’s a man who’s challenging your authority.” The Jews lived under Roman rule and didn’t have any authority to put a person to death. If he said not to stone her, then they could accuse him of breaking the Mosaic law and discredit him with the people.

These religious leaders followed the Mosaic law to the letter. That law said anyone who commits adultery should be stoned to death.

By bringing this woman to Jesus, the Pharisees already broke their laws, thereby condemning themselves. They dragged the woman by herself. There was no second eyewitness as required by the law.

They spoke as if the law required the death penalty for women only, ignoring the male partner. The law, however, makes it clear both the man and the woman involved stand under the death penalty.

“If a man commits adultery with another man’s wife—with the wife of his neighbor—both the adulterer and the adulteress are to be put to death” (Leviticus 20:10).

The woman, the law—they were just bait to trap Jesus. It didn't matter to them whether this woman was stoned to death. She was just someone they could use to bring Jesus down.

Jesus' response

As they hurled their question at Jesus, Jesus stooped down and wrote on the ground.

They must have thought: "Aha, we got him now! He's just buying time."

By stooping on the ground, I think Jesus was getting everyone to take their eyes off the woman—shuddering in sadness, shame and humiliation—and draw their attention to himself.

We don't know what he wrote. Some scholars suggest he wrote the men's names and their sins. It's possible he wrote the law they misquoted. I think he was playing tic-tac-toe.

I don't think it really matters what Jesus wrote. I think it matters that he stooped down. I think he stooped down to show his humility and that he was not going to judge the woman or even condemn her accusers. Jesus knew they already had condemned themselves.

He permitted the religious leaders to stone the woman, with one condition—"if you are without sin." When Jesus shined a big spotlight on them with that statement, they were exposed as no better than this woman. They were sinners just like her.

The first time Jesus stooped down, it was for the woman. He was not going to cast the stone at her nor condemn her. The second time Jesus stooped down, I think it was for the Pharisees and religious leaders.

I think he stooped down to save them face. He knew they were guilty. He

did not need to condemn them. They already had condemned themselves. He stooped down so the men could slip away without him pointing a finger at them and humiliating them like they did the woman. He saved their face. He allowed them to make their exit quietly and with some dignity, something they didn't afford the woman.

The woman's response

As the last of the religious leaders left the temple court, Jesus slowly straightened up and faced the woman for the first time.

No doubt, she was bewildered by this whole drama. She had been caught in her sin. She knew she was guilty and should be punished according to the law. But the religious leaders—her accusers—suddenly were gone. The only person who could have stoned her that morning was Jesus, but he didn't.

As the story ends, we are left to imagine what happens next. My guess is, after she heard Jesus' word of non-condemnation and hope, she couldn't believe it.

"You mean I'm free to go? No stone? No condemnation? No death?" she might have asked.

"That's right. You go on home. I won't condemn you. Instead, I'm giving you the chance to start a new life and live a new way. Stop engaging in this type of sinful behavior," Jesus may have said.

Do you think the woman went back to the behavior or lifestyle that almost got her killed? I don't think she did. We should not go back either.

Pastor Panha Mey is the pastor of Cambodian Baptist Church of Houston. This article is adapted from his sermon on the woman caught in adultery. The views expressed are those of the author.