

What a Story! **Sermon on John 7:53-8:11**

What a story!

I have always known of it.

I love it!

But what I had not known is that it has been pushed around like an old unwanted piece of furniture which nobody wanted to make use of, before it found its way into our Bibles.

German Bible translations only recently offer information on this story's odyssey in and out of the Bible collection which later formed the so-called canon, the Bible with all its books as we hold it in our hands today.

My English New Revised Standard Version however, has this story in brackets.

And in a footnote I read the following: "the most ancient authorities lack chapter 7 v53 and chapter 8 v1-11. Other authorities add the passage here..." or elsewhere... "Some mark the passage as doubtful."

What do we do with this?

In an essay by my old seminary professor Bishop Walter Klaiber which he sent me as a "gift" the other day, I read that an ancient second century bishop had already commented on the story... naming a source for it which he called the Gospel of the Hebrews.

What this makes clear is that the story is very old, and probably somehow original, but has not always had its place in one of the four gospels which we have in our Bibles today. It may have been passed on as an individual little story. However, scholars agree on the assumption that the story found its place in the Gospel of John in the 4th century at the latest.

In spite of the debate there is about whether this passage was originally part of John's gospel or not, the incident rings absolutely true to what we know of Jesus' character.

The story begins with a description of the situation in which the main story takes place. "Then each of them went home." (v53) They must have met the day before. And all of them went home. Jesus, who had no place to stay in that region, went out to the Mount of Olives. He spends the night outdoors and returns to the temple early in the morning. People come to him and listen eagerly to his teachings.

And then comes the real story: The scribes and Pharisees bring "a woman who had been caught in adultery" to Jesus. In other words, she had been sleeping with the wrong man.

Bringing this woman to Jesus was part of the strategy of the teachers of the law and the Pharisees to discredit Jesus. They thought that the only options Jesus had were either to say "leave her alone" or "stone her".

The first would suggest that Jesus did not take her sin seriously enough, and the other (although required by the old Jewish law) would lead people to doubt whether Jesus lived out his message of love and mercy.

Again: What a story!

From verse 3 on, we hold our breath. It is a story full of excitement and shock. We feel for this poor woman. We can sense her panic and the scribes' and Pharisees' lust to hurt and destroy. And we can imagine Jesus standing there and knowing the weight of the risk at which he's put.

We only hear a short piece of an incredible story. The shortness, the matter-of-fact reporting of a highly emotional case makes us curious. We'd like to know more.

What was the delicate situation in which the woman had been caught?

And why is she now alone?

Where is the man they found with her?

Did he manage to slip out?

Was he protected by the men?

Did those who now accuse the woman turn a blind eye to the man?

The rights situation was clear. Both of them, man and woman, should receive punishment. But for some reason they'd only got hold of the poor woman.

This woman is taken to Jesus.

"Now what do you say?"

Jesus responds by writing something on the ground. We are not told what he wrote. Nobody knows.

Some interpreters would like to think of it having had a relation to what Jesus said immediately after having written on the ground.

He stands up and says: "Let anyone among you who is without sin, be the first to throw a stone at her."

"Let anyone among you who is without sin, be the first to throw a stone at her."

...what a sentence!

The people had insisted on Jesus responding to their demand. "They kept questioning him..." the Bible says.

Only then Jesus stands up and speaks.

"Let anyone among you who is without sin, be the first to throw a stone at her."

Jesus sets a high standard.

Only those who are completely without sin, only those who have never acted against the law are allowed to throw a stone.

By saying this Jesus shifts the focus from himself and the woman to her accusers. He neither denies the validity of the law nor condemns the woman to death. He lets those who press on him reflect in quiet. He doesn't even look at them. He bends down and writes on the ground again.

(pause)

And then the absolutely unexpected happens: “When they heard it, they went away, one by one...”

The accusers left. The older ones first – probably because of their longer experience of life...

In my Africa Bible Commentary I read a Kenyan saying to undermine this: “Undu kikame kiambaa kite kitwatye tiwo kiambaa kyakwata – the bush baby makes a different cry when it is trapped.”

That no one threw a stone is surprising.

You would expect that there may have been a few who would have claimed themselves free of sin. But obviously Jesus’ sentence had hit a nerve and none of them dares to begin the cruel and inhuman stoning.

When all the accusers are gone, Jesus asks the woman: “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?”

There she stands in front of Jesus, and somewhere at some distance there may still be a surprised and curious crowd – witnessing to what Jesus and the woman say.

The woman briefly says: “No one, sir.”

And Jesus’ answer is just as brief: “Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.”

Jesus was not in the world to condemn it, but to save it. The woman is given a new chance for life... Yes, she has sinned, but she doesn’t have to do this anymore. She is free!

What a story!

I am glad it made its way into the Bible.

I am thankful that it found refuge in the Gospel of John! It is a wonderful and inviting testimony of Jesus’ outstanding mercy and grace.

It is a powerful story! And it is probably one of the most popular New Testament stories. Jesus’ words about “casting the first stone” are quoted in an endless variety of contexts... not always doing them theological justice.

This beautiful gem of a Bible story must by no means be only seen as a warning against self-righteous judgement, or a description of Jesus’ tolerance of adulterous women. No.

It contains some very striking sides of Jesus which may challenge and invite us into a life that is different from that of the “rest of the world”.

Again: what a story!

I love the way Jesus reacts to the scribes’ and Pharisees’ test.

Writing on the ground signalled his clear unwillingness to let himself be drawn into their agenda, and his unwillingness to allow them to control the situation.

“I am not going to be trapped by you” he must be thinking. “I am not your tool!” When Jesus does speak, he speaks to the situation of the scribes and Pharisees as well as to the woman.

The scribes and Pharisees brought the woman to Jesus as an object to be manipulated for their own interests. But Jesus treats the woman and the scribes and Pharisees as theological equals, each as human beings to whom words about sin can be addressed. Jesus offers all his conversation partners in this story the opportunity to break with old ways, with darkness and the power of death, and to enter a world of freedom and grace.

The scribes and Pharisees are invited to give up the categories according to which they had tried to control people’s lives. Jesus offers them the freedom to question the claims of their religious establishment and open up to Jesus’ way of grace and mercy.

The woman is invited to embrace a new future that will allow her to live as a free woman – far beyond oppression, pain and the power of men.

Jesus shows the women and men of his time a life free of social and religious oppression. His words to both, the scribes and Pharisees and the woman, have a political and theological dimension, rather than a mere moral one.

By his very presence Jesus challenges the law and the power of those who seem to be in authority. Jesus calls the position and authority of the powerful and mighty into question. He brings the promise of freedom to all... scribes, Pharisees, the woman... to every one at any time.

He refuses to let the powerful use him as a tool, make him an accomplice in their patriarchal collective of men. He denies the traditional role of the Jewish man of his day who cares for the honour of the men and tramples the dignity of women under foot.

In doing so he saves a woman from being publicly executed.

The patriarchal order is turned upside down.

And the community is offered a new way of life in freedom and equality of men and women.

No stoning.

No oppressing.

No accusing.

No hurting.

The reality of the woman in our story may have been a different one though. We know how slowly a society and its values and norms change. We know how easily people fall back into the old patterns as soon as the current crisis is overcome.

So, let us imagine, in our story the only person who truly begins an entirely new life, is the woman. She cannot go back to her husband because he has not changed. She may not even want to return to a life pattern of tragic love, male oppression, and structural and maybe physical violence... Who knows... She cannot go back to her parents, because they have not changed. They would only see the terrible shame of taking her back in and would not want her. Plus, they would not want to have to feed another mouth too. What can the woman do?

(pause)

Here is my guess:

As far as I understand the Jesus movement in those days, the woman may have found a substitute for her family of origin. She may have found people to live with. She may have become a follower of Jesus, a female disciple with him and his friends out there on the road...

She may have found a small group of people to share a house with. She may have moved in with Martha and Mary, or with Simon Peter's family. She may have become best friends with Mary Magdalene.

She surely must have found sisters and brothers who shared a similar story, and who were open and welcoming and took her in. Such communities must have existed then. They must have been the very small beginnings of the early church.

(pause)

I pray that as our story found a refuge in the Gospel of John, the woman of our story found a safe place within a community of faith.
Amen.