

“New Rules”

John 8:1-11

Chelsea Cornelius | Sermon for Sunday, January 16, 2022

When I was a first-year college student here at UW, I took a health class. It was a Gender and Women's Studies course called “Women's Bodies: Health and Disease,” and it was a science class for if you were not a science person. And the class was huge –hundreds of students all filed into a large lecture hall each week.

On that first day of class, I remember the professor standing at the front of the room and instructing the class to get out a blank piece of paper. Then she said, “Okay, I want you to draw and label a picture of what we consider typical female genitalia.” Then she said, “And these will be collected when you're done.”

And so all 200 of us, quietly, diligently, started drawing as best we could.

First I felt confident, pulling out my paper and pen: I'm a strong independent woman, I can handle a pop-quiz.

But as the TA walked around collecting the diagrams, underneath my brazen self-esteem, I felt so, so flustered.

I was watching my peers and classmates looking equally flustered, I was watching the professor's face with a look of amusement at her provocative assignment, and under the stress of drawing anatomy on the first day of class, I was second guessing everything I knew about bodies–my body!. I'm also not a very good artist, and the whole experience felt, just, embarrassing. And my drawing wasn't even that bad! I was flustered.

12 years later I remember this day—clearly that seed of feeling flustered and embarrassed got planted deep.

Our scripture reading today tells something of this experience. Well, maybe not *exactly* this experience, but the people in this story know something of being flustered, embarrassed, caught off guard. After all, the story I'm about to read is called, "The woman *caught* in adultery."

The gospel story I read earlier (John 8:1-11) tells us that in the morning while Jesus was teaching...

³The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery; and making her stand before all of them, ⁴ they said to him, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. ⁵ Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" ⁶ They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. ⁷ When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." ⁸ And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground. ⁹ When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders; and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. ¹⁰ Jesus straightened up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" ¹¹ She said, "No one, sir." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again."

Now, this is sort of a messy story. It's about sex, and sex with someone who was not this woman's spouse, and then that woman seemingly dragged out of bed and into the public square to be shamed, and then maybe stoned to death. And also the dramatics around what Jesus will say—life or death, condone or condemn. It's quite the scene.

Given the dramatics, I want to look at a few artistic depictions of this scene (and I promise you they're better than my women's studies drawing):

SLIDE 1: First, an oil painting from 1888. We see Jesus on the left crouching down in white, and the woman on the right center, being held still and pointed at by the group, head down.



SLIDE 2: This style might look familiar–this is a Rembrandt: Enormous, dark, our eyes guided right to the woman at the center of it all. And so many onlookers in the shadows. We almost don't notice Jesus in this one, on the left and standing, because our (everyone's!) gaze is focused on her.

¹ Vasily Polenov, *Jesus and the Woman Taken in Adultery*, 1888. Oil on canvas, Russian Museum, St. Petersburg.



SLIDE 3: This third one is quite different—an Italian painting that is bright and bold, the woman at the center and standing—taller than anyone near her, and Jesus crouched, looking up at her (it’s almost the opposite of the one we just saw). And in the flurry and motion we also see that she’s draped in what looks like her own bedsheets—the scandal all around her.



² *The Woman Taken in Adultery* by Rembrandt, 1644; National Gallery in London

³ *Christ and the Woman Taken in Adultery* by Giovanni Domenico Tiepolo (1752)

There's two more I want to share:

SLIDE 4: This one is from 1941, done by an African-American artist named Horace Pippin. We see in this one the women crouched down, and Jesus in purple pointing at her as he admonished not her, but those who brought her here. You see around her are stones, already thrown. It's also worth noting that of all the faces we see here, Jesus' skin is darker—a subversion of power dynamics and assumptions that hints at the deeper meaning of this story.



SLIDE 5: The last one is by a contemporary artist originally from China named He Qi (“Chi”). The colors are bright and bold, the woman on the far left— in the scandalous outfit—Jesus at the center, and the others gathered near, holding stones (the guy on the right ready to throw one).

⁴Horace Pippin, *The Woman Taken in Adultery*, 1941. Oil on canvas.



No matter how this story is depicted it is quite the scene. This is a messy story about sex, and shame, right and wrong, being caught off guard, and not just looking at others' sin but looking at our own.

See, in all of these representations we've just looked at, one thing is obvious: There are a lot of people involved, in the wrong, or watching and saying nothing.

And if we look closely at the story, beyond the spectacle of the adultery and the woman wrapped in her own bedsheets, we see that this is also a story of the Pharisees and onlookers being made aware of their own actions. They have just dragged this woman into the public square to embarrass her, condemn her, and see if Jesus will join in. And what really happens is that *they* are made a spectacle, a charade of the rules they say they follow. The Pharisees look like fools.

Luckily for this woman (and for us) Jesus refuses to play by their rules of in or out, life or death, glorified or degraded. Jesus doesn't play by the rules of shame. Verse 7 reads: "When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, 'Let anyone among you who is without

⁵ He Qi "Woman Caught in Adultery" (2013)

sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” He says to them: You want to make a spectacle of her wrongs? You want to shame her? Go ahead, as long as you’re willing to do the same for yourself. You’ve got a stone to throw? Well get in line in case anyone has one to throw at you. Of course he doesn’t mean it—that they should all get in line to be stoned; he means to say, justice will never be done through degradation.

Now this is not to say that there is no harm done from the woman at the center of it all; we see this in the end after all the onlookers slink off, when Jesus speaks directly to the woman and says, “I do not condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again” (vs. 11). There are rules, there are guidelines for sexual ethics here. Affairs and betrayals and lies do real damage.

But the story isn’t really about the woman alone. It’s about everyone, and the good news of God’s grace in messy situations.

Because the thing is: *Shame is a great equalizer, but not a great motivator.*

What I mean is that shame is the great equalizer between the woman and her betrayal, the Pharisees and their arrogance, and the bystanders and their silence. They should all probably be embarrassed, ashamed of their behavior.

But shame doesn’t get us very far. Shame is a great equalizer but not a great motivator.

Thankfully the stories we call gospels, the guidance we call good news—it does not play by the rules of shame.

The story tells us this—that there are standards and sexual ethics *and* there are new rules of good news: Whoever is out, is in. Whoever is put in harm’s way is protected. Whoever is degraded, mocked, or dehumanized is accepted; the good news does not leave anybody out. It’s messy. It’s

messier than we'd like it to be. Just like our actual lives and actual relationships.

Lutheran Pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber in her recent book *Shameless: A Sexual Reformation* writes that "If the Gospel is where we find healing [...], then it must also be where we find freedom. [She says] [So] even if it is the last thing I want to do, I absolutely have to believe the Gospel is powerful enough, transgressive enough, beautiful enough to heal not only the ones who have been hurt but also those who have done the hurting."

This is good news in a messy world.

This is good news in a world filled with hurt.

This is good news for those of us who feel like we can't shake the shame we feel about what we've done or what we haven't done; the shame of what happened to us that was not our fault at all; the things we've never told anybody. The things we tried to tell about and were not heard, received, or respected. The things we learned as kids that don't ring true anymore; the things that make us curious, excited, nervous, flustered.

There is grace in very ungraceful places.

In this messy story we are offered new rules beyond any litmus test of in and out, condoned or condemned, glorified or degraded.

It doesn't mean anything goes. It doesn't mean there are no wrongs to be corrected, hurt to be accounted for, changes to be made.

It means we have good hard thinking to do about our own sexual ethics, and a sexual ethic centered on something other than shame.

It might not feel very graceful a lot of the time.

And the good news is that there is grace in very ungraceful places.

Thanks be to God. Amen.