

# The Woman Who Was about to Be Stoned\*

John 8:1–11

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THIS ACCOUNT IS found only in the Gospel of John. As all the biblical manuscripts were originally copied by hand, they are not always consistent. The fact that this incident is included in some texts and not in others seems to indicate that there may have been various opinions concerning it. Some manuscripts from as early as the third century contain the story, which indicates that it must have been important for some people. Yet there is also speculation that it was a later addition from another text and not a part of John's original gospel.

In any case it is interesting to note that, from very early in church history, this story has been retold and dramatized often. Even in movies, it always receives a great deal of attention. We, as women, may prefer not to focus on it as much as on others. We may feel that the editing reflects a male point of view and that it is interpreted from a male's perspective.

The account begins, "Early in the morning he came again to the temple. All the people came to him and he sat down and began to teach them. And the scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery" (8:2-3). As they made her sit in the middle of the crowd Jesus was teaching, they said to him, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery" (8:4). The writer adds that they brought the woman to

Jesus in order to trap him, so that they could accuse him.

As I began a study about women who had the opportunity to meet Jesus personally, there were many impressive ones to choose from. At first, I did not really consider this woman and now ask myself why I was not more aware of this woman whose life was saved by Jesus.

From our modern perspective, this woman's story is one in which her personality and even her very existence are ignored. So it may seem to be a very cruel, thoughtless and basically unpleasant story.

Though I am a strong supporter of the new, cooperative Catholic-Protestant translation of the Bible and highly recommend it, I was disturbed by the title given to this account in the UBS third edition, which was simply "The Woman of Adultery." Why is this label used only for the woman, with no mention of the man who also certainly committed adultery? (I am happy to report that upon my recommendation to the Japan Bible Society, the title was changed to "Neither do I condemn you.")

I wanted the change, even though tradition might have dictated the other title, because I hoped to convey a less biased viewpoint to future readers. The prejudice expressed in this title distracts us from the essential point of the story. Basically, Jesus' message is that the woman is not alone as a sinner.

In this handling of the text, we detect undertones of the stereotypes of women as sexual objects. These stereotypes are particularly disturbing to us as women because they are usually accompanied by the tendency to see women as weak and as only serving a sexual purpose. Many of us have had the distasteful experience of sitting in a crowded train, where the men around us are examining explicit pornographic pictures in a magazine or a newspaper.

“Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground.” This disinterested attitude of Jesus is very important, I feel. Some people wonder what Jesus might have been writing. Since we have no way to determine that, it cannot be too significant in understanding why Jesus did not condemn the woman.

The focus of the story is on the woman herself, a powerless woman whom no one intended to help, being used as the means to trap and accuse Jesus. Perhaps for Jesus, the sight was too cold and cruel to endure; he could not even bear to look.

There may also have been women standing behind the men who questioned Jesus. Because they brought a woman before him, this event must have taken place in the outer court of the Temple where women were allowed to enter. So she also had to bear the cold, scornful looks of other women and Jesus must have sensed this as well, even as he looked at the ground.

The scribes and Pharisees were eager to observe the Law precisely, and so were well-versed in the Old Testament laws pertaining to adultery. Those laws said:

You shall not commit adultery (Exodus 20:14, Deuteronomy 5:18).

If a man commits adultery with the wife of his neighbor, both the adulterer and the adulteress shall be put to death (Leviticus 20:10).

If a man meets a virgin who is not engaged, and seizes her and lies with

her, and they are caught in the act, the man who lay with her shall give fifty shekels of silver to the young woman's father, and she shall become his wife. Because he violated her he must not be permitted to divorce her as long as he lives (Deuteronomy 22:28,29).

In the biblical laws, in the case of adultery not only the woman but also the man is punished. Moreover the law is more strict toward the man than toward the woman. In the case where a woman's cries for help could not have been heard, she is excused and only the man is killed. In all cases, adultery was committed by a man. However since a woman was considered essentially a possession of her husband, the adultery was considered to be a crime against the husband and not a violation of the woman's human rights.

The gospel of John, by contrast, had been edited during the Hellenistic period when the prevailing attitude was that in adultery the woman was most to blame. Moreover there was a more permissive atmosphere about sexual customs.

In prewar Japan we can find many cases where the law was very strictly applied to women but very generously to men, even to the point of ignoring their part altogether. The issue of “comfort women” (women forced into sexual slavery by the World War II Japanese military) may have occurred as a result of these loose standards and the overly permissive attitude toward men.

Even today, in Japan, it is shocking to learn the extent to which sexual practices are included in the tourist industry. Not only do men travel to other Asian countries on “sex tours” many women from those countries are brought to Japan under false pretenses and end up in the sex industry. The average family in Japan has no idea of this issue and would not come into contact with these women, who are usually confined to metropolitan entertainment quarters.

I first became aware of this so-called "tourist" industry when I served as chairperson of the National Christian Council in Japan (NCCJ) Women's Committee over 20 years ago. The committee received an official letter from a Korean church women's organization alerting us to the sexual abuse of Korean women by Japanese tour groups. We were urged to take action and a committee of both men and women was organized by the United Church of Christ in Japan (UCCJ, or Kyōdan). This letter had a strong impact on us as we saw other church women challenging in very concrete ways the issue of young women being forced into prostitution. We, as women and sisters, could not ignore the pain of these young women.

Traditionally women have paid little attention to men's sexual habits. Women have been trained to consider such things as none of their business. So Japanese women also came under criticism for their passive attitude toward prostitution. This letter spurred us as church women to confront these issues in our own culture.

Addressing men, Jesus said, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell" (Matthew 5:27-29). Many church people, particularly men and their wives, feel that issues such as the sex tourist industry have no relationship to them and are not appropriate subjects for discussion at church. But surely they must hate immorality. The church exists in society, so we cannot ignore social problems.

In Japan there is also the issue of women from other Asian countries coming to Japan to work as prostitutes here. Ten years ago, in Tokyo, the Japan Woman's Christian Tem-

perance Union organized "HELP," an emergency shelter for these Asian women. For many young women who have come to Japan from poor areas of Thailand or the Philippines, living conditions in Japan have steadily deteriorated in recent years. Unless we as women address this exploitation, it will continue. We must express our concern.

Looking at the story of the woman who was brought before Jesus, we noted earlier that there may have been other women watching the scene from behind the scribes and elders. We can imagine that some of those women also accused her, thinking, "She is an adulteress; we have nothing in common with her." They would not have looked on her with any sympathy or kindness or tried to understand her pain and humiliation. And it is often the same today. If we as women cannot put aside our own feelings and begin to understand one another, the problem of sexual exploitation will not be solved. We cannot allow discrimination to cloud our relationships with other women.

After the war the conscription of "comfort women" by the wartime Japanese military was a practice that came to the attention of various individuals. Within society as a whole, however, the issue was unknown. This abuse was brought to the attention of the public by a Korean woman, a professor at a women's college in Korea, who conducted her own investigation in Japan, traveling on foot and using the Japanese that she had not spoken since the end of the war. Her efforts forced us to face the reality of what had happened. She herself understood the feelings of those women who had been forced to become sexual slaves; she saw them as her sisters. This viewpoint should serve as a model for us all.

I was once invited by a minister to speak at the evening service at his church on Cha-ju Island in Korea. Attendance at the evening services at my own church in

Tokyo was usually fairly sparse, so I did not expect to see many people there. To my surprise, the church was full! More than 500 people, including a choir of 100 young people and college students and an ensemble of high school students playing flutes and violins, filled the church and caused the very air to vibrate with their glorious hymns.

As he led me to the pulpit, the minister, who had been a fellow doctoral student with me at San Francisco Theological Seminary, said, "This is the first time a woman minister will give the sermon here." I felt as though I was accomplishing something for the sake of all women!

After the service he took me to a corner of the churchyard where there was a stone monument about 20 feet high. It was engraved in both Korean script and in Chinese characters, which I could understand. I learned that it was erected to commemorate an outstanding minister of that church who had gone to Seoul, where he died a martyr's death in prison during the Japanese occupation. My dear friend wanted me to see this.

Later I had the privilege of meeting a group of Christian women leaders on the island. They discussed two things with me: the exploitative tourism problems and the "comfort women" issue. I was told that on this small island, which can be crossed by car in only an hour or two, approximately 200 young women had been abruptly taken from wells along the waterfront during a one-month period and forced to serve as sexual slaves to the Japanese military. Those young women were the same age as I was at that time. One of the women in the group said to me, "These women took the place of you who are the daughters of well-bred families." We can participate in discrimination even when we are unaware of it ourselves.

We who are involved in the struggle for women's rights often get a cool reception

from other women who may not be aware of the issues or who feel that these tragic circumstances are someone else's business. It is uncomfortable to face the reality of such exploitation, but we cannot escape the facts. To adopt the attitude that sees some women as sexual objects, disconnected from the day-to-day existence of the average woman, is to allow our entire society to be colored by masculine-centered thinking. The way men view women affects the way women view other women and their problems. We must be alert to the artificiality of this viewpoint.

We can imagine the stern looks on the faces of the Pharisees as they said to Jesus, "Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" (John 8:5) John goes on to say, "They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him" (8:6). Jesus must have been very sad to see this side of human nature that is so quick to discriminate and judge others, that smugly and self-righteously admits to no mistakes and refuses to understand the fallibilities of other human beings.

Jesus bent down, gazing at the ground and writing something there with his finger. Finally, since the Pharisees continued to question him to force him to answer, he lifted his head and replied, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her" (8:7). This statement brings us face to face with the dilemma of whether we can trust our human judgement in moral issues—a problem that transcends gender. This case of adultery reveals that none of us can escape the fact that we cause others to sin; in exposing the sins of others, our own sins come to light as well.

Hearing Jesus' words, one by one the elders left and only Jesus and the woman remained. Jesus looked up at her and said, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" (8:10). When she answered,

“No,” Jesus responded, “Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again” (8:11). Jesus, who knows fully the depth of human sin, did not bring an accusation against her. This is the meaning of Jesus’ existence. Jesus sees us, who are quick to accuse others as sinners, and he forgives and accepts us, telling even us, “Neither do I condemn you.” This is the good news of the gospel that comes to us through Jesus Christ, who accepts us just as we are. To know our own sin, and yet to know it is forgiven—here is the essence of the gospel.

Jesus demonstrated this in his encounter with this woman. Even the scribes and Pharisees, who were solidly against Jesus, experienced a moment of understanding. They left, one by one, until none remained. The potent force of forgiveness was at work.

In meeting Jesus, we are freed from a sense of superiority as we confront our own sinfulness. We are changed from people who self-righteously accuse others into people who forgive. This is the reality that is demonstrated in this story. The change we see in the crowd as it disperses reflects the inner changes in the hearts of the people.

In some translations, the final words of Jesus are translated with the nuance, “You may not sin any more.” These words seem to present a harsh contrast to the tenor of the rest of the story. Very recent translations are a little bit different. They convey the sense, “You will quit doing wrong from now on.” (The same sort of change occurs in John 5:14, in the story of the man healed after thirty-eight years of illness. Some translations emphasize, “You must not commit sin anymore,” while newer translations prefer, “You will stop committing sin.”)

People assumed during New Testament times that failure to observe the Law is sin. Jesus’ words could be interpreted as either a command or a statement about the woman’s future. Perhaps the latter is the more natural translation, meaning that her status

of being forgiven by Jesus can be kept continually. In saying this, Jesus seems to be telling the woman that abundant, limitless forgiveness is hers. When we don’t receive the judgment we expect but instead continual forgiveness, we feel refreshed with springs of new life and we have courage to face life.

This account is not just an isolated incident where Jesus won out over the scheming intentions of the scribes and Pharisees. More essentially it shows the heart of the gospel, which is for everyone.

When we read this story we may get the uneasy feeling that, in the minds of many people, women are equated with sinfulness. This is an important point that we cannot ignore. In paternalistic societies matters related to sex become taboo. Contact with women is discouraged and the masculine worldview becomes the norm. Women are seen to exist only in order to serve men. When we, as women, also comply with this worldview, there is a sense in which we endorse it by our actions. We must be alert to this and raise the consciousness of those around us to recognize that men and women together are blessed by God and are equal in importance.

Men who are brought up in paternalistic societies feel hesitant to acknowledge this openly. But if they begin to understand even a little, then they can begin to see how they have been shaped by that society and begin to confront it.

Sex is a blessing from God. Anyone who abuses their sexuality, whether a man or a woman, abuses a gift from God. But this biblical account teaches us that such abuse is not something for a third person to judge.

Even though the regulations concerning marriage and adultery are stated very explicitly in the Law and thus are a very clear part of God’s order, a third person cannot judge the heart of another person. In this light, perhaps Jesus’ encouragement to “sin no more” could be a sign of his compassion in

encouraging her to live an autonomous, self-directed life.

This can be said of us women ourselves. We cannot confront patterns of behavior in our own cultures, raise the consciousness of others in our culture and bring about development if we feel inadequate and inferior to men. If we feel that we are somehow less than men, we will never be able to challenge the male-centered standards in our society. This attitude is a warning to us.

In Genesis 1:26 and 27 it is clear that women are also created in the image of God. "Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the

sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth. So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them." Women and men both are created by God and thus blessed with dignity and purpose. We women must grow in our self-realization as we explore the essence of who we are as beings who reflect the image of God.

\* Used by permission of the author from her book *Putting Down the Water Jar*. Translation help by Deborah Schmidt.