

FIVE FORKS BRETHREN IN CHRIST CHURCH

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SERMON: *Jesus and the woman caught in adultery*

SERIES: *Jesus and Women*

SCRIPTURES: *John 8*

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**Credit to Ken Bailey "Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes" and John Ortberg
"Everybody's Normal"*

Well good morning, it so great to worship with you. Want to say welcome to all of you here in this room and many gathered on-line, at home, tuning in to the live stream.

There is an intriguing scene in the movie Schindlers List. A profound conversation between Schindler and one of the German commanders about the nature of power.

(PIC OF SCHINDLER AND COMMANDER)

Who has it and how it's used. This is during the time when the Germans are basically exterminating Jews at will.

The soldier says, "**Control is power.**" It causes fear, obedience, we can do what we want. "They fear us because have the power to control. Because we have the power to kill. To condemn, abuse, the power to do what I want, without repercussion...and no one can stop us."

That is often how power is viewed.

That's not power though. That's false power, that's power corrupted. But that's not power.

In one of the classic lines from the movie Schindler says, That's not power, rather, **“Power is when we have every justification to kill (to control) and we don't.”** When rather than used for control or condemnation we choose to pardon, to free, to give life.

This morning's message is all about power. Who holds the power? How it's used? How it should be used?

This morning we are in the 4th week of a sermon series called Jesus and women (**Series graphic**). One of the more remarkable aspects of the Gospel stories in the context of the ancient Middle East, is its inclusion of women. So we are taking 5 weeks to walk through these stories, trying to pay careful attention to the cultural significance of the stories and then talking about what we learn as followers of Jesus.

If you have a Bible, turn with me today to John 8.

I. Jesus and woman caught in adultery.

There are three primary characters in this story. And so we are going to follow the story through the experience of these three characters.

First, let's look at the...

A. The Power-Hungry Pharisees.

² At dawn he appeared again in the temple courts, where all the people gathered around him, and he sat down to teach them.

³ The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group ⁴ and said to Jesus, “Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. ⁵ In the Law Moses commanded

us to stone such women. Now what do you say?”⁶ They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him.

Are you familiar with the phrase...“power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely”?

Now, we must be careful with the phrase. Power in and of itself is not evil. But as with all good things God created, power can be corrupted. Power is corrupted when, rather than us as a tool to create and give life, it is used to control and condemn.

That seems to be what’s going on with the Pharisees and the teachers of the law in this story...power corrupted.

A couple of clear indicators here about the motives driving the Pharisees’ behavior.

You’ll notice the story says, “this woman was caught in the act of adultery.” There are two questions you should ask yourself.

The first question is, **how exactly do religious professionals catch a woman “in the act of adultery”?**

And, second, did you ever wonder **what happened to the man?** Adultery is rather hard to commit on your own and according to Jewish Law (Lev. 20:10)...the man is to be put to death as well. Somehow he has “disappeared from the scene of the crime.”

Why would they do this? Because the religious leaders do not care about upholding the law and they certainly do not have the woman’s best intentions at heart.

No, you see, the primary motivation of the Pharisees in this story, is power. How to **maintain power at all costs.** They are threatened by Jesus and his popularity and

his interpretations of the Jewish Scriptures. His movement is growing. People are starting to believe the things he says. And they are afraid of losing power.

They will sacrifice truth, justice, fairness, common-sense, morals. They will do whatever it takes to maintain power. And that's why power is such a dangerous tool in our world. It's the temptation to be in control. To use, manipulate...the world, circumstances, other people to our advantage.

And how we love to be in control, the one calling the shots, to make sure that our privilege and rights. We begin to believe that our ability to control is what will save us.

For the first 300 years of its existence the church, the followers of Jesus could be described as **a persecuted minority**. The followers of Jesus, persecuted by the great empires of the world.

But in **the year 312** a significant event occurred that seemed to be the beginning of change. **The Emperor Constantine** was fighting for control of the Roman Empire. And in **the Battle at Milvian Bridge**, he claimed to have had a vision.

Where God told him to put the symbol of Christ on the shields of his soldier, perhaps a cross. Legend has it Constantines army won the battle and became the impetus for Christianizing the Empire. Demanding everyone to become Christians.

And the cross which had been a symbol of sacrificial love, given up for enemies, was emblazoned on shields of corrupt power and violence as almost over night Christianity went from persecuted minority to **the persecuting majority**. And since that time the church has struggled to understand it's identity and posture and the roll of power for followers of Jesus.

Sometimes followers of Jesus today, believe that the Kingdom of God is most secure/influential when the people of God hold positions of power and control. We put the cross on our shields and swords and position and privileges.

When we do we have abandoned the savior and taken on the posture of the Kingdoms of this world.

And sadly so often what happens is that we will sacrifice truth, justice, fairness, common-sense, even our morals in order to make sure we maintain power.

Politics is based on power, and power almost always causes divisions. It is very difficult indeed to get across a message of love and power at the same time. One of them always loses out, and we are called to emphasize love.

Whenever we catch the church trying to win, we have already lost. Stanley.

The truth is, having controlling power makes things comfortable for the people of God, but it often doesn't encourage us to live like members of that Kingdom.

In fact, when Jesus was arrested and put on trial before Pilate. It looked as if all power was being taken from Jesus. This would be the time to "really let his power show." But Jesus said to Pilate...

"My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place."

And what does power look like in this Kingdom of Jesus?

Ephesians 6 - ¹⁰ Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power...with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, ¹⁵ and with your feet fitted with the readiness that

comes from the gospel of peace. ¹⁶ In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one.

¹⁷ Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

Jesus said “power in his Kingdom is not about control, manipulation, maintaining privilege...but instead is marked by a life of righteousness, peace, faith, truth.”

We must be careful about the way in which we use and allow power to be used in our world.

That leads us to the second character in our story...

B. The Powerless Woman.

Now almost immediately we are inclined to point to the fact that this is a sinful woman who needs straightened out. We'll get to that in a few minutes. But before we get to that we need to recognize something else.

In order to maintain their power, the religious leaders have to take advantage of the woman. She is simply a pawn in their cruel power-mongering game. We asked earlier, where's the man in all of this! She simply to be used and disposed of.

She has no opportunity to tell her story or explain what happened...not that this woman is innocent. She's doing something she shouldn't be and we'll get to that...but for now, at this moment, she simply represents the **powerless**.

All those around her are indifferent to her suffering, her life, and her situation.

Some form of this woman's story has been played out for centuries by countless thousands...powerless, used, neglected, avoided, abused. This is what happens when maintaining power, and privilege...becomes the driving force or motivation.

It is at the expense of the powerless, the weak.

Many of you are probably aware of much of the violence that has been taking place over in the Middle East recently. And there are all different kinds of opinions about what exactly should be done and who is at fault. But what is often overlooked are the powerless, who are simply caught in the crossfire of the empires' cruel power-mongering games.

The situation has somewhat of a more personal nature for myself and really for our church. You may or may not be aware that we support a couple living in Beit Jala...very close to Bethlehem. **(PIC OF Jen & Ra'ed)**

This is my cousin Jen and her husband Ra'ed and this is their family. Jen is an American who group here in PA and her husband Ra'ed is a Palestinian. They represent some of the countless thousands caught up in the middle of the struggle for power and control.

She recently shared that they...hear the gunfire and the rockets in the distance during the night and we know what that means. The loss of innocent life, the seizing and bombing of homes, and the immense pain and suffering is unbearable to witness; we feel helpless in the enormity of this ongoing devastation.

She said their oldest daughter Lina, asked the other night, "Will a missile hit our house while we're sleeping?" In my best effort to reassure her, I told her that the fighting is far away from us (mmm...ok, about 400km away) and I told her that God's guardian angels are surrounding our house, watching over us and protecting us (which is what I tell my kids every night). I'm not sure what else there is to tell her.

She also shared another gut-wrenching story about Najeyeh, a Palestinian girl close to Lina's age, whose family was determined to stay together at all times of day and night, moving from room to room together, so if the worst happened they would remain whole as a family. As explosions echoed all around them, Najeyeh had to go to the bathroom. Her mother told her to go quickly and come back to them. Najeyeh refused to leave them, but her mother insisted that nothing would happen in those two minutes. She sent her father with her to the bathroom. In the next moment, a missile entered their home killing Najeyeh's mother, 2 sisters and 2 brothers. Najeyeh and her father were pulled out of the rubble 9 hours later, alive, yet no longer whole.

For almost a century, Palestinians are a people who, for the most part, have gone unseen and unheard. It's true that the most extreme members have made a name for themselves, but the common people, the ones who build families and work to provide for them, who want their children to experience safety, security, success and delight in life - these people are lost in a sea of turmoil.

Church, the powerless are our priority. It is our priority to know and to be aware of their situations and it is our priority to step in and raise our voices on their behalf. Please this week, take some of your time to become a little more aware and then to pray for Jen and Ra'ed and Lina, Elias, Layan, Nour. And for the many caught up in the world's power-mongering games.

There is one more character in our story. The most important character. And really he's the one who has all of the power anyway. He just uses his differently. So let's again turn and look at...

II. Jesus

“What do you say Jesus?”

But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. ⁷ When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, “Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” ⁸ Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground.

Scholars have long debated exactly what Jesus wrote on the ground that day. Nobody really knows.

- It was the custom in Roman Law for a judge to first write the sentence and then read it...some think Jesus was writing out what he said first, as symbolism for his authority to make a judgement related to this woman.
- Some think Jesus was writing out the 10 commandments...before he made the statement about anyone without sin throwing the first stone.
- Some think Jesus was a little bit more direct, and that he actually started writing out the specific sins of the religious leaders in the group. For example...“standing at the window watching adultery take place a lot longer than was necessary to gather evidence...”

But whatever it is that Jesus is writing, he confronts the corruption power-hungry men with their own corruption.

There must have been a hush over that crowd, talk about a little awkward silence when Jesus made his statement.

⁹ At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. ¹⁰ Jesus straightened up and asked her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?”

¹¹ “No one, sir,” she said.

“Then neither do I condemn you,” Jesus declared. “Go now and leave your life of sin.”

Two things, I want to point out about Jesus response here.

First,

1. Jesus accepted the sinful woman.

Jesus initial response was not to quote the law to her about her sin. His initial response was to accept her. Support her. Stand up for her. Jesus used his power to love the adulterous woman.

Now let me just qualify what exactly I mean here.

To accept someone is not simply to tolerate them, but rather to affirm to them you think it’s a very good thing they are alive. It is to genuinely learn to like the person.

When messed up sinners came to Jesus the only sinless person who ever lived he did not merely endure them with patient resignation. He genuinely liked them.

I was reading about little girl who once wrote...

“I grew up knowing I was different, and I hated it. I was born with a cleft palate, and when I started school, my classmates made it clear to me how I looked to others: a little girl with a misshapen lip, crooked nose, lopsided teeth, and garbled speech.

When schoolmates asked, “What happened to your lip?” I’d tell them I’d fallen and cut it on a piece of glass. Somehow it seemed more acceptable to

have suffered an accident than to have been born different. I was convinced that no one outside of my family could love me.

There was, however, a teacher in the second grade whom we all adored – Mrs. Leonard by name. She was short, round and happy – a sparkling lady.

Annually we had a hearing test...Mrs. Leonard gave the text to everyone in the class, and finally it was my turn. I knew from past years that as we stood against the door and covered one ear, the teacher sitting at her desk would whisper something and we would have to repeat it back – things like “The sky is blue” or “Do you have new shoes?” I waited for those words that God must have put into her mouth, those seven words that changed my life. Mrs. Leonard said, in her whisper, “I wish you were my little girl.”

In this moment, I believe Jesus genuinely liked the adulterous woman before him. When he looked at her, he was not first of all disgusted by her appearance or failures. He saw a young woman, made in the image of God, to be loved and restored. Jesus said to the adulterous woman that day. “I wish you were my little girl.”

As followers of Jesus, we should be known as people who like people who are nothing like us. (Stanley)

We are not called to “clean up” society. Jesus and Paul spent almost no energy on trying to clean up the Roman empire, despite their terrible practices of abandoning infants, pederasty, and gladiator games. He did not give us the challenge of imposing our morality on others, but rather of spreading a far more radical message: that God loves sinners.

We can show genuine love in many ways, but one of the first ways we can do this is by **listening**.

Listening is a very powerful tool and many of us don't know how to do it well. We like talking at people, and correcting people...but we don't like listening.

You know there are two ways to listen to someone. One is to look for flaws in what they have to say; you filter everything they say through that lens. You know you already disagree with their position or their lifestyle and so you're not really listening to them, instead your listening for flaws and how you are gonna correct their thinking as soon as they finish talking, if you even let them finish talking.

Another way is to look for the good and the humanity in the other person as they are speaking. It's to ask yourself, what is the other person really saying? How are they feeling? Why do they feel this way? In what way have I, or my group of people, contributed to that feeling? If somebody I loved was feeling that way, what would I try to do about it?

Jesus was an expert listener. The first step in learning to love sinners is learning to listen first.

One of the marks of maturity in faith is when we start to listen with ears that are patient and compassionate, that are able to recognize the humanity in other people.

“These people tell no one their secrets because they are certain the stone-throwing will begin.”

You'll know that you are starting to develop a heart like Jesus when people are willing to share some of their most vulnerable hurts, failures with you.

Why is it that in ancient time's women like this so often ran to Jesus but in modern times so often run from his followers?

We have to become better at listening and loving sinners.

Second,

2. Accepting is not approving.

Accepting a person, genuinely loving someone, is not the same thing as approving of their behavior. Jesus does not approve of the women's past. After he has accepted her, he says to her, **"Now go and leave your life of sin."**

And I'll just tell you part of the reason Jesus says this. It's not because he enjoys making people feel guilty and shaming them for their failure.

So often, our motivation behind calling out the sin we see in others is because we get a certain level of "satisfaction in making people feel guilty and really sticking it to them."

If that's the motivation behind us, we missed the first step of loving the person and genuinely caring about them. And we need to stop and go back to step one. **If you don't genuinely care, then don't start calling out their sin.**

Instead, Jesus addresses the woman's sin after he has proven his love. And the truth is he does genuinely love her and he wants the absolute best for her. Jesus knows that a life of adultery does not lead to joy and peace and contentment; fulfilling relationship...which is truly what the woman wants.

Sometimes people outside the church say, *I'm not really sure I want to go to church and follow Jesus, because then I'll have to follow all of those rules that keep me from really enjoying life.*

What you need to know is that Jesus wants you to really enjoy life...His way. He genuinely likes you. He said one time, **"I have come that you may have life abundantly."** And since he created you he knows better than anyone how you were made to live. Our tendency is to believe we know better than Jesus does.

Sometimes my kids get this way also. They think they know better and that my goal as parent is to just eliminate all of their fun.

But you see deep down I love them and I want what's best for them.

And you just need to know the same is true of Jesus. Trust him that he knows what's best for you. Jesus wants us to leave our sin, because only then can we find abundant life.

Go and leave your life of sin because if you don't it will soon destroy you. It will destroy your relationships and steal your joy and peace.

Yeah but Jesus are you asking me to give up gluttony. I enjoy just eating what I want, when I want.

Yeah but Jesus are you asking me to give up lust. I enjoy being able to look at what I want, when I want.

Are you asking me to give up some of talking about people behind their back...

Jesus says, only when you are truly willing to let go of these kinds of things will you discover the better and abundant life I've been offering you this whole time.