The Woman

John 8:1-11
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When I told various people that I was preaching on this particular text, typically referred to as "The Woman Caught in Adultery", people responded with surprise and said something like, “Wow you are brave!” or if they didn’t know that I chose to preach on this passage they say, “Wow they really push you as an intern” and then look confused and concerned when I tell them that I actually chose to preach on this passage.

I don’t think it is brave to preach on this passage.
Or at least I don’t think that it should be considered brave.
I think that people are surprised because we are not used to young women behind the pulpit talking about women and sexuality
Especially when you combine sin and sex

We are scared of it.
Could Jesus really forgive this woman?
She cheated on her husband! She didn’t even repent!
We are scared about what this says about grace.
And we are scared because it talks about sex.

We like to pretend that things like bodies and sex and adultery don’t exist when we come into church.
So if we do talk about it, it sometimes feels sacrilegious. Impure. Unholy. Scandalous.

But it isn’t. This too is holy space. This too is scripture.
We can’t ignore it.

I think it is important for us to look at biblical stories with fresh eyes, and look for the complexity. How the story gets told, and re-told, isn’t necessarily how it should be interpreted.

This story is usually told in a way that uses this woman as an example of the ultimate sinner. She betrayed her husband.
She should face judgment.
Maybe not killed, but at least punished a little.
It should be clear that what she did is wrong.
We emphasize the fact that Jesus said to “go and sin no more” more than the fact that he said, “neither do I condemn you”

If we do this, we turn this woman into an object, just as the Pharisees did. They treated her as a tool to try and trick Jesus.
They didn’t actually care about the woman, they cared about their own power and status as religious leaders.

Jesus was threatening that power and status.
He must be taken care of.
But they needed a reason to get rid of him.
A really good reason, like betraying the law of Moses.
He was a rabbi, he should know what the sacred text says
What the law means
Or the other ditch is obeying the law of Moses at the expense of a woman's life.
Jesus words of mercy over sacrifice would mean nothing.
The people would turn against him.
Either way Jesus was doomed.
It was the perfect plan. A foolproof plan.
But they needed a decoy, something or someone to hinge their strategy on.
So they used this woman.
The dehumanized her.
They turned her into a bargaining chip.
This woman was not an object. She was a person.
She had a name. A family.

I think that we forget the fact that biblical characters were real people too.
They had real lives, stories, dreams.
They made good choices and bad choices, just like we do.

We should know by now that there are no truly "bad people" or "good people" we make choices every day that determine how we live our lives and treat other people.
We are complicated.
People are the way they are for a reason.
People make certain choices for a reason.
If we take the time to figure out why they are the way they are and why they make certain choices, then we can never truly hate them.

We like to distance ourselves from "sinners".
Oh well I would never commit adultery,
I am not like her.
When we do this we make the same mistake as the Pharisees,
who assume that they are more worthy or more holy, than other people.
Especially a woman like this.

We need to seek to understand, not to judge.
Only Jesus can judge sin in people's lives.
And in this story he chose not to judge or condemn.

If we are to look at this story in order to understand,
not judge this woman
(like many other interpretations have)
we need to understand a few things about the context in which this woman lived her life.

To start,
Adultery was about control over property, not about love.
Marriage worked differently when this woman lived,
it didn't work like it does today.
Men and women lived in a patriarchal context.
This means that men were the head of households; they had control over their wives, children, slaves, and the rest of their property.
Women were literally treated as goods to be bought and sold.
Men sold their daughters to a new family, either paying for her to be taken off their hands, or accepting money or other valuable items like livestock or food for them.

This is also why fathers cared about their daughter's virginity.
If the daughter is a virgin, then the father can assure her suitor that he has no competition for an heir.
If she was not a virgin, she was treated as damaged goods.
she was rendered unmarriageable, useless on the marriage market.

A woman who was accused of not being a virgin could be disowned, sold into slavery, beaten, mutilated, or killed in order to compensate for the loss of property and honor.
This is exemplified in Deuteronomy, where you will find instructions for the men of a city to stone a woman to death if she was discovered to be not a virgin.
Women's literal monetary value, what they contributed to society, was their sexuality.
Women haven't gotten the privilege to choose who they want to marry until the last 300 years.

Loss of virginity is not the same thing as committing adultery,
but they are both life and death matters.
Lev. 20:10 and Deut. 22:22 (the law of Moses that these Pharisees were talking about)
Say that both parties found to be adulterous should be put to death.
As one commentary puts it: "The integrity of women is defined as virginity before marriage, chastity after it."

Adultery was about control over property, not about love.
Patriarchy also meant that the family line was traced through male heritage.
That's why it was important for men to control their wives sexuality,
if a man's wife bore the child of another man,
then all of his household and property could be passed down to a false, illegitimate heir.
His lineage, his legacy could be cut off!
This is why men cared about adultery.

Adultery was an insult to honor because it was an attack on a man's property.
It was considered stealing.
Patriarchy began around the same time as "property" became important.
During the Neolithic era, so 8500 to 2600 BCE
Humans started creating boundaries, saying this is mine.
This was also around the same time that animals were domesticated.

This is how human beings began treating each other as property.
Adultery was about control over property, not about love.

Has anyone ever wondered why this woman committed adultery?
Assuming that she actually did?
The Pharisees never took a moment to ask her, or learn her story.
Has anyone ever placed themselves in her shoes, and wondered what it would be like to be her in this story?

Today I want us all to imagine what it would be like to be this woman.
I will give you a second to put your own personality and story on pause for a bit.
I know we can't do this completely but humor me for a bit, ok?
I want to tell this story from the perspective of this woman.
This story is a product of my imagination, but according to my research the story very well could have happened this way.

With this in mind, let's imagine what it would have been like to be this woman.

I feel naked and exposed.
My sin is spread out for all these men to see.
My insides poured out and picked though to decide how I should be punished.

It's hard to believe that just a few hours earlier I felt so safe and secure.
Finally I had my moment with the person my soul desires.
A glimpse of freedom away from the person who owns me
The household that depends on my
Cooking and cleaning and washing and
Don't forget to get the water!
Make sure the bread will be ready by nighttime
Keep the children entertained
Wash the clothing
Nurse the sick one
Feed the animals
The list never ends.

There is no escape
I want to run away
I want to take my babies and leave and never look back

And then he comes home.
My body shudders at the thought of his gruff, unwanted touch.
He smells like the street—a sickly sweet mixture between spices and sweat
His breath is yesterday's dinner

I forgot to wash his feet
In the chaos of his return grubby hands pull on me my mind in too many places

He stands there
I see the anger in his eyes.

Apologetically I fall to my knees and wipe the dirt and grime from beneath his toes

I know what will happen because of my mistake, my body tenses instinctively
The bruises from last time haven't even faded yet

Shame burns on my face
I want to curl into myself, hide, and disappear forever

I see him—the teacher they talk about, the one they call messiah
I don't believe in their fanciful prophecies, but I see why everyone likes him
His eyes are reassuring, familiar
He seems soft and strong at the same time—a rare combination
I relax a little in his presence

But his attention is not on me—or my captors
He ignores the men who pester him
They don't care about justice
They don't care about me, or the man I was with—they didn't even bother to bring him along

They need the teacher to slip up so they can regain their authority as spiritual leaders
Because the teacher is messing everything up
He is turning the temple upside down
They want him out of the way

I am a trap. A pawn in their plan. A tool.
I dangle like a worm on a fisherman's hook
Will he take the bait?

He preaches and teaches about mercy,
He says he is not here to judge the world but to save it
But as a Jewish Rabbi the law should be important to him

They knew he wouldn't want to do it.
But they knew if he broke the law they could kill him too
They want two deaths
One by stones, the other by the cross

They want to stone me.
They want to kill me for what I have done.
But they don't know me.
They don't know the man I was with or why I was with him.
They don't know my husband, or how he treated me.

They didn't take the time to ask.
It doesn't matter—
They won't listen anyway
They have already decided who I am
They have boiled my entire world, my entire identity down to a convenient crime

I am not a person to them.
I feel invisible
I am the woman caught in adultery—that's what people will say about me
That will become my name
Even after I am gone
My heart sinks

Finally the teacher has had enough of their incessant pestering
I see the strain in his eyes, the wrinkles in his forehead
He is thinking hard, and frustrated

Dust falls from his fingers as he stands up,
Abandoning whatever he was writing in the earth,
He is now eye-level with the men bent on tormenting me

The teacher looks at them—through them—like he could read their souls
Maybe that's what he was writing, everything they ever did
Or maybe he was writing the law of Moses?
I strain my neck to make out the words but it is no use, it is too far away

As the teacher speaks, I can barely hear what he says
My blood is pounding in my ears

"He who is without sin among you, let him be the first to throw a stone at her"

I hear the catch of breath, I feel my own jaw drop
Everyone is so silent, it seems as if even the animals pause their clamor

I see the surprise, then panic course through them
Their plan has backfired
Memories of their own mistakes drown their minds
They cannot do it

The older ones give in first
They have lived long enough that life has left its mark on their soul
Soon the pride seeps from the puffed chests of the younger ones
They deflate, their shoulders sink, they drop their stones and leave one by one

I didn't know the sound of rocks hitting the ground could be so beautiful
Like a heartbeat

A second chance
But I am not yet fully pardoned

I am now alone with him
he is writing again.
If only I could see what he was writing!!

I am alone with the one they call Messiah
The savior of the Jews
The one who heals, casts out demons, and eats with tax collectors
The one whose friends smell like fish
His heels are cracked from miles of walking
His hands are callused from working wood

I am more aware of myself than I have ever been
My bruises seem to glow in the morning light
My tired eyes are cast down; it is too much to look at him
I clasp my shaking hands

My knees feel weak
There is no hiding my fear, my shame
I am utterly exposed, vulnerable
I feel…broken
What can he say to a woman like me, one he shouldn't even speak to?

He stands up, looks at me and I meet his gaze for a moment

There are tears in his eyes.
I realize we are both crying.
They want us both dead—and here we are still alive

I get the feeling that he knows that I didn't want this

Like he can read my mind
Like he knows exactly who I am
Like it was him who carved my body from the clay of the earth
Like he was the one who gave me my defiant spirit, my restless body

He knows I am ashamed and sorry—but also drowning.
A bird with clipped wings.

Maybe in the Kingdom this teacher talks about women could choose whom they marry.
Maybe they could freely speak their mind.
Maybe they could learn in the temple.
Maybe they could work with wood too.

But I have forgotten my place
For a moment I let myself feel like a mans equal
What kind of woman has these thoughts?
Apparently the kind that should be stoned to death.
I realize my error and I look away quickly

His voice shatters the silence between us, I jump a little, startled
He talks to me. To me!!

“Woman where did they go? Did no one condemn you?”

He did not need to ask the question
He saw them leave, he sees my body intact
There is no surprise in his voice

Why talk to me?
Why say the obvious?

I barely get out a whisper
“No one, Lord”

“I do not condemn you either. Go and sin no more.”

Go and sin no more.
Those words ring familiar in my ears.
I have heard the stories of his miracles…
That is what he said to the lame man who he healed!
He told that man to go and sin no more so nothing worse would happen to him
That man can walk again

Does that mean that I am healed too?

He does not condemn me.
Does this mean I am free?
I am stunned and silent.

I go to walk away and I am shocked with the ease in which my legs move.
I stretch my arms and for once they don’t feel sore.
My skin is not tender.
I breathe more easily
It is as if I am a young girl again

I turn to express my gratitude but the teacher is no longer there.

I am healed!
I am forgiven!

I practically skip home.
But as I near my house fear closes my throat
In my amazement with what just happened I didn't think about how my husband will react.
I hardly notice how my body instinctively turns in on itself,
My face pales
My only means of defense
My only way to survive
Has been my compliance, my submission

How will he react when he hears I have defied him so?
I find the house empty.
My sister is next door holding my babies.
My husband is gone,
He cannot face me since I have taken his honor
He has realized that he can no longer control me
He has divorced me for my unfaithfulness

A pang of guilt battles with my sigh of relief
But the news is not over
My forbidden love has offered my family enough to acquire me!

I am amazed that he will still have me even though I was paraded around and branded as the woman caught in adultery
Maybe he sees me for who I am

How can this be?

I no longer feel afraid.
My shoulders relax as I sink into this miraculous freedom.
I think back to the teacher
His tears
His mercy
I know that he saw me for who I am

I regret that I left so quickly and forgot to look at what he had written in the dirt.

I pull my children in close and my heart swells.

Perhaps I do know what he was writing after all.