

Holy Hesitation John 7:53- 8:11

Hesitation as a noun,

is defined as,

“the action of pausing
or hesitating

before saying or doing something.”

And as a verb it is,

“to pause before saying or doing something,
especially through uncertainty.”

Many of us know proverbs about hesitation:

“He who hesitates is lost.”

“In your hesitation, I found my answer.”

“Hesitation increases in relation to risk
in equal proportion to age.”

“A moment of hesitation
may cause a lifetime of regrets.”

Most of these are not terribly uplifting.

Often hesitation is seen as cowardice;

as though a lack of courage or presence of fear
might be the impetus for hesitation.

But then again there are all those
security videos where you see a person
hesitate right before

the van comes crashing

into the Food Lion entrance, right?

When in your life, have you hesitated?

Was the result good or bad?

Positive or negative?

To pause,

before saying or doing something.

There are plenty of biblical examples of hesitation.

Remember Lot's wife?

She hesitated.

Lot was Abraham's nephew

and when the families parted ways,
Lot headed west to the Plain toward Egypt,
settling as far as Sodom.
But you remember,
Sodom was a wicked place
and the angel of the Lord
rained down sulfur and fire from heaven
and destroyed Sodom and
her wicked sister city, Gomorrah.
As Lot and his family fled,
they were told not to look back
at the destruction of the cities
but...Lot's wife hesitated,
she looked back.
And became a pillar of salt. (Gen. 19:26)

During the reign
of one of the worst kings in Israel's history,
the prophet Elijah confronted the people of Israel
about whom they were willing to serve.
King Ahab, it is said,
did more evil in the sight of the Lord
than all the kings who went before him.
His wife Jezebel,
set up altars and shrines for worship
for the god Baal.
So, the Lord sent a drought on the land
because of the people and king's wickedness.
The prophet Elijah
is sent to Ahab
and they gathered together the people of Israel.
"So, Ahab sent to all the Israelites,
and assembled the prophets
at Mount Carmel.
Elijah then came near to all the people and said,
'How long will you go limping,
hesitating, with two different opinions?
If the Lord is God, follow him;
but if Baal

then follow him.” (1 Kings 19:20-21)

Jeremiah received the call of God

when he was young

—but he was hesitant;

“Ah! Lord God!

Truly I do not know how to speak,

for I am only a boy.” (Jer. 1:6)

Moses, after encountering God in the wilderness

and hearing God’s command for him

to lead the Hebrews out of Egypt,

hesitated,

“But suppose [the people] do not believe me

or listen to me

but say, ‘The Lord did not appear to you’.” (Ex. 4:1)

In the New Testament

Jesus attracted crowds of people.

After several would-be followers approach him,

he tells them,

“No one who puts a hand to the plow

and looks back

is fit for the kingdom of God.” (Luke 9:62)

But of course, we know

hesitation can be good and bad.

If I were to hesitate in the heat of an argument,

things would likely go a little better

for everyone involved.

But then again,

if I hesitate too long a stop light,

I’m likely to get honked at,

or worse!

Did you know

that it is estimated that we make

35,000 decisions a day?!

That’s a lot.

I wonder how many decisions we hesitate over?
How many of those decisions deserve a pause?
And what space is created
when we are willing to hesitate?

What if we used *hesitation*
as a method for scriptural interpretation?
What if **hesitation** becomes holy
and offers deeper insight to gospel passage this morning?
This text is often titled,
The Woman Caught in Adultery;
I'd like to re-name it, Holy Hesitation: And How It Transforms.

The message or the moral
we are supposed to glean from John 8
seems straightforward enough
—a woman caught in adultery
and brought before Jesus
receives grace instead of condemnation.

What else is there to interpret?
Why are we talking about hesitation?

This story, like many John stories,
is unique to this gospel.
And in terms of its writing and structure,
it sounds more like a story
from Luke than John.

Jesus, remember, is bold in John.
He is the light of the world
And very truly, I tell you,
he is here with living water
if we want a drink.
Jesus is wordy in John's gospel.
He is direct even though he speaks a lot in metaphors,
and he loves a detailed explanation.
Jesus in John is very eloquent
and, as we have said
before, can be rather long winded.

But here, in this mornings' text,
Jesus isn't those things.
The Pharisees talk more than he does,
as does the narrator
—which in this gospel is not the norm.
In his dialogue with Nicodemus
and the Samaritan woman at the well,
Jesus has plenty to say—
but not here.

Here, Jesus seems reserved,
almost like he doesn't want to get drawn
into the fray.

In a word,
Jesus, hesitates.

Looking closely at this story
you might notice there are a few gaps.
One that seems obvious
to every woman out there...
If the heading of this passage is called,
'The Woman Caught in Adultery',
where exactly is where is the man?
This woman, John's says,
was *caught in the very act*
—well, where was the man
who would have been *acting* with her?

Ahem.

And do you know what else?
Mosaic law stated that in the case of adultery
both parties should be stoned,
the man and the woman.
So why was she the only one
brought forward?

Also, where are the witnesses?
This claim of adultery
is supposed to be supported
by two credible witnesses.

Who caught this woman
—in the very act?
John's narrator claims
that the Pharisees
were trying to test Jesus
so that they might be able
to bring charges against him.
So, is this woman just a scape goat?
Can we truly know
really what even happened?

The biggest gap however is this:

What did Jesus write in the dirt?

He bent down and wrote on the ground
twice!
Twice!!

Why didn't someone think
to remember and record
what he wrote?

Was it, "it takes two?"¹

or was it something
from the Ten Commandments,
or the Torah
or maybe an admonition
from the prophets?

Who thought,

let's tell this story
but leave out ***that*** detail?
So much theological ink
has been spent trying to figure out
what was written on the ground.

And while this story appears only in John,
most scholars believe
that it has all the right marks
for being an authentic incident

¹ Francis Taylor Gench, *Encounters with Jesus: Studies in the Gospel of John* (Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY 2007) pg.53

from Jesus' life.²

The message of grace
that Jesus offers is so powerful,
it brings up another gap:
why didn't the other gospels tell this story?

For all its holes,
what this story does offer us
is space to imagine
how those gaps might be filled.
And the only way for us to imagine
what might fill in those spaces;
the only way for us to imagine
afresh interpretation,
is to allow ourselves to *hesitate*.

If we pause before leaping
to imagine the worst of this woman;
if we pause before we assume
the worst of the Pharisees;
if we pause before trying to the figure out
what Jesus wrote in the dirt;

if we pause and wonder
why the early church
might not have wanted
this story in each gospel narrative,
or why John would have made sure to included it...
the space of hesitation
becomes our model for faithful interpretation
of this passage.

And hesitation is our model
because Jesus is the one who uses it.

Anglican theologian and former Archbishop of Canterbury,
Rowan Williams,
wrote a small book titled,
Writing in the Dust: After September 11.
In it he asked and addressed Christians

² *ibid* pg. 51

questions related to the terrorist attacks;
but his title and framework for the book use
this account we read in John 8.

Williams writes,

“What on earth is [Jesus] doing...There is one meaning that seems to me obvious...He hesitates. He does not draw a line, fix an interpretation, tell the woman who she is and what her fate should be. He allows a moment, a longish moment, in which people are given time to see themselves differently precisely because he refuses to make the sense they want.”³

This space of hesitation,
this longish moment
that Rowan Williams sees in the text,
is a space that Jesus creates
for every character in the story
and for us.

Remember he writes in the ground,
not once, but twice.

The question handed to Jesus was,
*what do you say to this woman,
to this situation;
if you are who you claim to be,
what will you say and do?*

And what Jesus does
is create space.
He squats down,
he hesitates,
and writes something in the dirt.

As Whit and I talked about this passage,
he told me about a sermon riff
that claims that just by squatting down
to write in the dust,
Jesus forces everyone
to look at each other.

³ Ibid, pg. 54

In whatever they were seeking to do,
by lowering himself,
the accused and the accusers,
are forced to look at each other;
they are forced to see people
not rules to be kept
and situations to be handled;
they are forced
to take into account
what they are doing
and to whom it is being done.

In those two moments
of bending down and straightening back up:
“by refusing to stand with them,
Jesus offers a visible sign of disengagement.”⁴

Thus, even when pressed,
because they kept on questioning him,
Jesus’ invitation
to cast the first stone
but only if sin cannot be found within one’s self,
is to force the hand of judgment
away from punishment, toward grace.
And to make that move,
to rethink judgement and justice
when looking at each other
and inwardly at ourselves
can only happen if we *pause*;
Jesus’ response and movement
are an open invitation to holy hesitation.

To pause before saying
or doing something.
Standing there looking at each other;
looking inwardly at themselves,
the Pharisees
hesitate;

⁴ Ibid pg. 53

they presented with a choice;
the choice of
trapping Jesus and killing this woman
or freedom—freedom from judgement
and freedom for mercy;
freedom to walk into a new future
that leans heavily on grace.

Given the space to hesitate,
the Pharisees walk away,
leaving one by one.

And finally,
when only the woman
stands before him,
Jesus offers her
the same thing he offered her accusers,
freedom.

Freedom to walk away:
from the judgement of others and self,
and freedom to walk into a new future where
no former sin can condemn you.

So, hesitate.

Pause.

Give yourself and others a longish moment:
because he who hesitates,
she who hesitates,
isn't lost—
but has found the way
by what's written on the ground.

Benediction

Lingering on what he might have written in the dust,
we are given space
to imagine what Jesus
might write on the ground for us.
We are encouraged to hesitate
and hope for grace in our own lives.

As Paul says,
there is no condemnation
for those who are in Christ Jesus.

Who stands here to condemn you?
Jesus asks.
No one answers the woman.

So, friends hear the good news,
as Jesus answered her,
“Then neither do I condemn you.
Go your way and sin no more.”