

- I. Advanced Organizer: the problem of “other”-izing
 - A. Zoo-topia.
 1. Assumes a world that has evolved past animals that eat other animals, to live non-violently alongside each other as herbivores. But they still have categories and stereotypes that permeate them.
 2. Bunnies aren’t supposed to be cops - that’s for lions, tigers, rhinos. Judy Hopps makes it. Force is in disarray with a series of cases that can’t be solved. Judy finds herself being blamed for the disarray; as an outlier, she’s an easy target.
 3. Later even greater group tension exposed. Plot of leader to pit everyone against a common enemy: prey versus predators.
 - B. Filmmakers knew that this would ring true. This is the week of Brexit...
 - C. Stereotyping and identifying others as suspicious not new. It’s been going back a long time, and was certainly something we see in the life of Jesus.

II. John 8:2-11 (NIV)

2 At dawn [Jesus] 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.

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.

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.”

- A. Analyzing the story. An adored story for many. Jesus has the ultimate mic drop here. And for many of us, it may appeal to our 21st century secular liberal, Bay Area ideals. “Don’t judge.” is often the takeaway. Maybe we even conclude that Jesus is actually soft on the whole sin thing. Doesn’t seem too bothered, by what’s going on in this woman’s bedroom, and we shouldn’t be either. And though these interpretations do I think get some of the amazing truth in this story, there is more going on here than that.
- B. To really understand what’s happening in this story, it’s helpful to be aware of and **keep in mind two important points** of cultural context:
 1. **The Impact of Roman Occupation.**
 - a) Jews were occupied people. Didn’t really have authority to enforce parts of their laws like execution. Doesn’t mean that public executions lynch-mob style didn’t happen, but technically they weren’t legal and could get them in trouble with Roman authorities.
 - b) As you might imagine, Jewish leaders resented the occupation; being hamstrung by it. They’ve been disempowered in really important ways. And now there’s this new guy who threatens to take away the only power they have. The religious leaders didn’t want

to surrender even more power to Jesus. Had to cling to whatever they could get. Jesus is a threat.

- c) Setting up Jesus with a classic double-bind. They think if he calls on a stoning of this woman, he could be reported to the Romans and tried for murder. But if he lets her off (which they likely figure he'll do given his friendship with other scandalous types), he'll lose face in the sight of Jews. He won't be regarded as religious teacher with authority to interpret the scripture.

2. The Intensity of First Century Jewish Patriarchy

- a) Not limited to Judaism in ancient world, but certainly there.
- b) Women were understood to be inferior beings; secondary creatures who were created to help and serve men, but not autonomous human being with equal dignity and agency. Women were property of the men they were attached to; first their fathers, and then, if they were married, their husbands.
- c) Adultery was essentially understood to be a wrong against another man. If a married woman was sexually involved with someone besides her husband, or even a betrothed woman was, it was adultery. It was a wrong against that woman's husband or intended husband. But for a married man, if he slept with an unattached woman it was seen as polygamy.
- d) Men who forced themselves upon women through violence were expected to claim those women as their brides. If they didn't want to, they still had to pay the father the bride price, because they'd essentially cheated him of what he was due when his virginal daughter was married off. Never mind the person who's been raped. She's not really a person anyway.
- e) Besides, a woman's sexuality is to be controlled. It's dangerous. Women were often seen as seductresses; the personification of unfaithfulness to God in the Old Testament is almost always a sexually permissive woman. Women are encouraged not to speak to men in public, lest they seduce them. The Talmud (a Jewish guide to live by in the Ancient world) even suggested that men shouldn't speak to their wives too often, lest they fall into sexual immorality. This created a context in which a man who had violated a woman sexually could be seen as a victim of her sexual allure.
- f) And women's status in this culture wasn't just reflected in sexual norms. Ancient Jewish women were often locked in the house, restricted to life in the home; discouraged from public life. Women couldn't read in the synagogue, while their male children could. They were generally kept from learning Torah, and performing religious activities. They were not counted in the census, and their testimony could not be counted in a court of law.
- g) If there's any question of how Jewish men perceived women, let it be answered by the prayer that many Jewish men in the first century were taught to daily pray: "God I praise you, because you did not make me a Gentile, or a slave, or a woman."
- h) All of this is the context in which our story arises, and within the story, we see this reality of patriarchy reinforced in the blatant hypocrisy at its center. At the center of this story is a supposedly adulterous woman, a sinner who has been engaged, reportedly, in a sin, that by its very nature, requires two people to commit. But only one of those two people is brought forward, and no one in the story ever mentions the other. Where is the man in this equation? He's nowhere to be found. Leads us to consider the following:
 - (1) Did these guys let the guy off simply because he was a guy?
 - (2) Was he one of them? One of their friends?
 - (3) Was there some sort of set-up? Were the Pharisees in collusion with the guy involved?

- (4) Was she a victim of sexual violence?
- i) What is clear is that she's a victim of violence in this story. Her rights to privacy have been violated as she was taken apparently in the act of intimacy. Then she was brought forward against her will, likely through violent means, publicly shamed, with the threat of violence to death hanging before her. Yet it is clear that this group of men who are treating this woman with such violence have no interest in her humanity, her motives, her situation. She's nothing more to them than a pawn in their chess game with Jesus.
 - j) I wish that two thousand years later, with all of our societal advances, I would have to strain to imagine the precariousness of the situation of a woman like this. But unfortunately, as we can see from our headlines still today, sexual violence against women, and a culture of men that refuse to take responsibility for their actions against them makes this feel all too close and familiar for comfort.
3. **So here's what we've got in the background of this story: a resentful, disempowered people, anxious not to lose more status, a threat to the little power they have (Jesus), and a further disempowered marginalized individual in the midst of them. This is a classic setup for scapegoating.**
- a) *What* is scapegoating?
 - (1) The image of the scapegoat comes to us most famously from the Hebrew Bible in Leviticus, but similar rituals appeared in other cultures, too. In the Jewish culture, once a year on the Day of Atonement, the Jewish priest would offer sacrifices to atone for the sin of the people, and then they would take a live goat, and the priest would lay his hand on the goat's head, and name the sins his people had committed, and it was meant to symbolize the goat taking those sins upon itself. And then the goat was cast out into the desert to wander; symbolically taking on the judgement of separation that the individuals in the community deserved, while the community received forgiveness and reconciliation with God.
 - b) Rene Girard was a twentieth and twenty-first century academic in the fields of anthropology, literature and philosophy, and he ended up writing extensively on the phenomenon of scapegoating in human cultures. His work has had profound influence in psychology, philosophy, theology, and more.
 - c) Girard believed in something called mimetic desire, basically at a base level, humans want things because others want them. We see what other people want, and we imitate; we begin to want it for ourselves. Eventually, this leads to conflict when we can't all have what we want. According to Girard, the internal conflict a group feels, can only be assuaged through violence. But rather than tearing the community apart, by everyone killing each other, the dominant group focuses the tendency to violence on an individual, or a sub-group within it. This sub-group needs to be eliminated, cast into the wilderness, in order to restore order to the group identity, at least for a little while. Girard believed that this pattern is found in all cultures' mythology, and that all cultures were founded upon the repetition of this scapegoating mechanism.
 - d) But here's the trick: **scapegoating only works if you have a goat.** Humans naturally resist committing violence against innocent others, but if the violence is committed against someone who is less than human, someone who is other, someone who is deviant, someone who *deserves it*, then the violence is acceptable. So the goal of scapegoating is identifying an other that must be expelled. An other that is unlike us. An other who doesn't deserve their place in our society. **When that other is expelled, all will be well. We will be great again.**
 - e) Sound familiar?

C. So this is the context Jesus finds himself in when his teaching at the temple is interrupted by a mob with a “sinful woman”. There’s political resentment, there’s patriarchy, there’s the phenomenon of scapegoating, and now there’s an angry lynch mob and a vulnerable woman in front of him. Sounds like a loaded powder keg. **How does Jesus respond?**

1. He Keeps His Cool.

a) This strange image of him bending down and writing in the sand. Lots of scholars through the ages have wondered what he wrote. There’s been lots of theories put forth. He started writing scripture verses about judgement and mercy. He wrote their names. He wrote out their sins. Personally, I like the idea of him drawing silly smiley faces...1st century sand emoji.

(1) I can understand the temptation. We don’t have anything Jesus wrote. This is the closest picture we have to it.

(2) What I think: if we needed to know what was written we would.

(3) What’s relevant is his demeanor.

(a) The Pharisees are worked up. Super emotionally charged.

(b) The woman is terrified; could be sobbing. She’s cowering. She’s quite possibly unclothed.

(c) The crowd would be emotionally amped by all the drama. Have you witnessed an intense debate? It doesn’t take you long to get emotionally invested too. Their religious leaders are calling this special teacher into the ring. It’s a smackdown.

(d) Jesus keeps his cool. **He maintains a non-anxious posture.** He takes his time. He doesn’t get drawn into the heat of their engagement. He doesn’t get triggered. He doesn’t make eye contact. He looks at the ground and draws.

(e) I have a hard time with this kind of thing. Sometimes my kids get mad at me. Cause I don’t buy the toy they want, or I tell them they need to clean their room, and in anger they might start throwing things, they lose it, they scream hateful words, and I feel my adrenaline surge. I want to yell back. I get amped.

(f) On my better days, I remember the words of **Daniel Tiger**. He has a couple of songs I’ve found relevant in these kinds of situations. Songs that were definitely designed by the PBS people to speak to me kids, but I probably use them more. -

i) “When you feel so mad that you want to roar...take a deep breath, and count to four.”

ii) “When you’re feeling frustrated...take a step back and ask for help.”

(4) How quickly do we find ourselves triggered on Facebook? In a conversation with family that turns to politics? Our defenses flare up. We become like animals who’ve just been threatened. We prepare to attack back. We feel the need to get the other person, to have the last word, to WIN. **If we look to Jesus as our model, he seems to be inviting us to something else.**

2. He Challenges the Privileged

a) The Pharisees are assuming they have the power/authority to exact judgment on this woman. They include Jesus in that privileged category. They are making the classic scapegoater’s assumption: that they’re in the right, that they’re qualified to pass judgement, and this woman is deviant and needs to be expelled.

b) But Jesus turns the tables on them. He challenges their very assumption.

c) The Old Testament Law the Pharisees are quoting did call for the execution of adulterers. Stoning, specifically, was only called for in the case of betrothed virgins; so the premise is questionable even there. But in the case of stoning, when a sin that called for stoning had been committed it was necessary that there were at least two

witnesses available who could testify to their crime; qualified witnesses who were not involved but were objective enough to give fair testimony. These first witnesses were supposed to be the first to begin the execution. All of this background seems to be conveniently forgotten by the lynch mob.

- d) But Jesus doesn't forget. He departs from the role they've assigned him as judge, and takes on the role of defense attorney. "Where are the credible witnesses?", his statement implies. Witnesses who are objective? Who are trustworthy? Who are above reproach? Witnesses without sin. You want to stone her; let them begin the stoning. If we're gonna do this, we better do it right.
- e) Jesus is calling out the cowardice of the mob mentality. Stoning masks violence in anonymity. Scapegoating masks violence in group purification. But to be first one to throw the stone means to recognize accountability.
- f) No-one wants that accountability. Perhaps this woman has sinned. Is it any worse than the sins that have been inflicted upon her? The sins these men are inflicting this very moment? Sins against her? Sins against their community? Sins against Jesus?
- g) C.S. Lewis said something that seems relevant here:
"[T]hough I have had to speak at some length about sex, I want to make it as clear as I possibly can that the centre of Christian morality is not here. If anyone thinks that Christians regard unchastity as the supreme vice, he is quite wrong. The sins of the flesh are bad, but they are the least bad of all sins. All the worst pleasures are purely spiritual: the pleasure of putting other people in the wrong, of bossing and patronising and spoiling sport, and back-biting; the pleasures of power, of hatred. For there are two things inside me, competing with the human self which I must try to become. They are the Animal self, and the Diabolical self. The Diabolical self is the worse of the two. That is why a cold, self-righteous prig who regularly goes to church may be far nearer to hell than a prostitute."
- h) These Pharisees are going to Jesus with what they think is the ultimate "gotcha". But he is not playing their game. He does not accept their assumption that this woman can serve as a community scapegoat. For Jesus, there is only one person in the space worthy of judging rightly another, and tellingly, that person does not have a stone in his hand. Jesus refuses to scapegoat. He stands between the scapegoat and the mob. He defends. He advocates.
- i) I think it's a beautiful image the writers of the New Testament give us, when they talk about the Holy Spirit that Jesus sends his followers after his death and resurrection. He empowers them with the same life of God within that he had. And they call that Spirit, the Advocate. Jesus loves his followers the Advocate, so like he did, they can stand in the face of evil, and say no, "you don't win today".
- j) We live in a world where it's not just fictional bunnies and predators that are being targeted as scapegoats. As followers of Jesus, we have to ask, where are the scapegoats in our midst? And how is Jesus inviting us, and empowering us by their Holy Spirit to advocate on their behalf?
- k) Even as we ask this question, we have to acknowledge the ways that the church has often failed in this endeavor. The church has participated in the marginalization of peoples, and the scapegoating of those it sees as others. At times these have been women. At times they've been Jewish. At times they've been slaves. At times they've been freed African Americans. At times they've been immigrants. At times they've been gay.

- (1) As Connie reminded us recently, Scripture has been used as weapon both to oppress and to liberate. So often with the gay community in recent years the church has responded by saying we “Hate the Sin, but Love the Sinner”. But again and again, our friends who are LGBTQ have responded, that doesn’t feel like love.
- (2) Emily Joy is a poet who recently wrote a beautiful piece to express this dissonance. Seems appropriate on Pride weekend to show. (“Hate the Sin, Love the Sinner” video).
- l) As follows of Jesus, we are called to stand against scapegoating in all its forms. We are called to name it for what it is and say no. We are called to say love means putting down the stones, not extending one hand while holding a stone in the other. We are called to renounce the politics of scapegoating. We say no to those who would try to unite groups of us by demonizing and dehumanizing others. This is why we go to Pride today. Why we make space for refugees. Why we befriend Muslims. Why we support Black Lives Matter. Why we say that rape must be accounted for.
- m) **And we will not repay evil with evil.** We will resist the temptation to paint those we disagree with, however rightly, in such broad strokes that they are now dehumanized in our eyes and in they eyes of those we influence. We decry the “us and them” and say everyone is us. Yes, that means everyone.
- n) Jesus Christ is the ultimate answer to the evil of scapegoating. He answered the problem of scapegoating by revealing it for what it was. He was the ultimate innocent who was killed to assuage the internal strife of the group, but as he died, as he was expelled, **he disempowered the evil mechanism itself because his resurrected life gave way to a new movement of people that refuse to participate in the violence of destroying the other.** We, the church, are called to imagine, and to live towards a picture of unity instead. A picture in which that evil that divides and turns brother against brother is vanquished, and the lion lays down with the lamb, and sisters and brothers from every tribe, and tongue and nation feast and worship the living God together.
3. There’s one other thing Jesus does here that’s instructive for us. **He Restores Dignity and Humanity to the Vulnerable**
 - a) The crowd disperses. One by one. First the older, than the younger. And then Jesus turns to the woman. He looks her in the eye. The woman he has taken upon himself to defend without even exchanging names.
 - b) “Woman, where are they?” he asks. “Has no one condemned you?”
 - c) “No one sir” she responds.
 - d) “Neither do I condemn you”. Jesus is the only one qualified to condemn her, and he doesn’t. It’s not that he doesn’t care. It’s not apathy. It’s mercy. Grace. Love actualized.
 - e) “Go and Sin No More”. He’s inviting her into something better. He hasn’t rejected her. He’s not dismissing her, the way those men did. He’s not casting her aside as a hopelessly immoral woman. He sees her as a full person. An imperfect human who makes mistakes, but who also has the capacity to learn from them. Who has the agency to make different choices. Who has the strength, the dignity, the capacity for integrity to grow. To become more than an adulterous woman. Jesus’ isn’t just letting this woman off the hook. He’s inviting her to live a life that isn’t enslaved by the perception of others, but is free to live with dignity as a woman created in the image of a loving God.
 - f) As we end, I want to end with a prayer that Haven could be a community that restores dignity and humanity to the vulnerable. Invite God to do that in our midst. That we would be a Haven for scapegoats. And for each of us, for the places where we have felt

dismissed, misunderstood, rejected, that we'd experience Jesus' loving call to dignity. His loving encouragement to grow. His warm assurance, "Neither do I condemn you."