



## **Broken Reflections: Broken Relationships**

**John 8:1-11**

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Washington Street UMC

March 11, 2018

As we journey in this season of Lent, we are considering the brokenness that exists in the world, and we are looking to see how God is working to offer healing in our places of brokenness. Over the past few weeks we have considered the brokenness of the world, the nation, and our own neighborhoods. Today, we take a step closer to ourselves, and we consider the brokenness of our personal relationships. In the midst of the brokenness that exists between us and others, God is working toward reconciliation; and to such an end, you and I are invited to participate in that healing work.

In 1994, Tom Hanks played the most lovable character, Forrest Gump. The story line follows this fictional character from the days of his birth for almost 40 years. Interspersed throughout the movie is a storyline looking at Forrest's attraction and care for his dear friend, Jenny Curran, known better to Forrest as, "My Jenny." According to Forrest, "Jenny and me was like peas and carrots."

Jenny had a rough childhood. She was abused by her father for years, a life she wished she could have escaped. Some years later, with life never easing up on her, having lived a life filled with drugs and promiscuous living in the 60s, Jenny and Forrest found themselves walking by the house in which Jenny grew up. The property is now abandoned and run down; there are shingles missing from the roof; the siding hasn't been washed or cared for in years. Jenny breaks down as she is filled with anger at the memories of her father. As she is standing on the dirt drive leading up to the house, she begins picking up rocks and chunking them at the house. In a fit of rage, she screams as she throws the rocks at the last standing physical representation of her father. Over the video you hear Forrest's sage voice speak, "Sometimes I guess there just aren't enough rocks."

Have you ever been there? Wishing and yearning for more rocks to throw? From our relationships with parents, to those with siblings, to those with work colleagues, to those with spouses or significant others, to those with friends, classmates, or neighbors – the reality is relationships are hard. Sometimes, the thing we want most is a few good sized rocks to chuck at the other person – perhaps something a little bigger and weightier than the ones you were given as you came in today.

Do you have your rock? As you hold your rock, I want you to think, whose name does that rock have written on it? If you had the chance, and a strong enough arm, toward who would that rock be flying through the air? Hold on to that name.

Our Biblical story today is about stone throwing people.

The story is another example of the Jewish elite coming to test Jesus. Like the lawyer last week, the intention of those coming to Jesus is to entrap him – to lead him in to saying or doing something that would discredit his teaching and weaken his growing popularity. Jesus has been travelling throughout the region, and he has been coming into the temple and teaching and performing healing miracles. His growing popularity isn't sitting well with the institutional leaders of the Jewish temple. His teaching is challenging their thinking; his witness is challenging their way of living; his miracle working is undermining their authority.

People in power rarely like it when their thinking, way of living, and authority is challenged. Today, you hear such instances written off as #fakenews or partisan bias.

To strike back at Jesus, the scribes and Pharisees brought before Jesus a woman they claimed to have caught in the 'act of adultery.' "Teacher," they say, "this woman was caught in the act of adultery. The law of Moses commands we stone such a woman to death. What say you?"

Jesus is caught in a double bind. "If he upheld the Law and commanded that the woman be stoned, [the leaders] could bring accusation [against him] before Pilate (since the death penalty was not permitted to Jewish authorities), and this could be combined with the popular acclamations of him as King. If, on the other hand, he overturned the Law, he would be discredited with the people."<sup>1</sup> In the view of the Jewish leaders, Jesus has no way out. This is their chance to refute his teaching at worst, and have him arrested and killed at best.

Don't think Jesus a fool, he knows what's happening. Jesus understands the rationale for their questioning, and he won't play into their game. Following their questioning, Jesus bends down and begins drawing on the ground.

Last week we talked about how frustrating it is when a teacher responds to your question with another question. Instead of giving a straightforward answer, Jesus responded to the lawyer in Luke 10 by asking a question in return. This story might present the only response by a teacher that's *more* frustrating. Here, when asked a question, Jesus simply bends down and draws in the sand. He's not looking at the scribes; he's not talking to the Pharisees; he simply diverts his attention and begins drawing on the ground.

You may wonder, why is Jesus disengaging? Is he caught in an impossible situation here? Is his safest bet really to avoid responding all together?

Unsurprisingly, these temple leaders don't like being ignored. They don't appreciate Jesus' lack of response. My boys are the same way. Have you ever experienced that with children? That's who these leaders remind me of – my four year olds. When the boys ask a question, like, "Daddy, can we go to the playground?" or "Why does he get to play with that toy?" and I don't answer them, all they do is keep asking. For some reason, my silence isn't enough for them to understand I don't want to engage. Like four-year old children, these Jewish leaders keep questioning Jesus, pushing the issue.

Finally, Jesus straightens up – he stands and addresses them, “Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” At this, Jesus again bends down and writes on the ground.

Following this statement, the leaders began to leave, one by one, beginning with the elders.

Why the change in heart? And what can we learn from this about faithfully living in relationship with others. How does this story teach us about God’s reconciling work?

In this story, there are a few relationships that I think are worth considering. Each relationship deserves reflecting on as we learn to live faithfully.

**First, we have the relationship between the powerful and the vulnerable.**

The scribes and Pharisees bring this woman to Jesus as a pawn. They were there to test Jesus, hoping to diminish his power and to increase their own. The woman, a vulnerable individual in a patriarchal society, served as nothing more than a means to an end for these leaders. And yet, it is this pawn for whom they have brought the stones. They are willing to take cheap shots at this vulnerable woman just so they can maintain their power.

Time and time again, we find that the privileged throughout history have relied on the vulnerable to be their pawns in the chess game of power. Just consider the past 250 years; from the origins of our nation, we see slave holders acquiring their wealth on the backs of stolen Africans. In the imperialistic season of land acquisition, we see our fore-fathers taking land from the Native Americans – abusing the vulnerable to acquire land at no personal expense. In the world of globalization, we rely on the poor of other nations to make our goods at pennies on the dollar, just so our profit and stocks lines can increase. CEO’s salaries increase two and three fold, while their employees are left struggling because they aren’t paid a living wage. Politicians at every level take advantage of the poor and the demographically diverse in publicity stunts to gain popularity among minority voters. Figure heads remain disconnected from the masses, until a natural disaster strikes, and *then* they want to be on the ground, inviting every major news outlet to capture the moment they are able to give a water bottle to someone who’s home has been destroyed.

Yet, we shouldn’t write this problem off as only something that is seen only among the elite. Such abuse of relationships happens even in our personal lives. Like the times we fail to offer support to classmates and co-workers in fear that our helping them will hurt us. As if we are all in this rat race that says we must be the stand out student or employee. God forbid our helping someone else leads them to get the prime internship, or be the one to get the work promotion. Siblings and relatives love each other in person, but speak ill of each other behind their back, hoping and vying for a bigger cut of the family inheritance. How we tip our service help, speaks volumes of how willing we are to use the vulnerable for our own benefit at little to no cost of our own. I could keep going, but in these and many ways, we seek to gain a leg-up on one another, as if our personal success is a sufficient and valid reason to mistreat one another.

The reality is, in any of these situations, the privileged, the power-hungry, and the abuser – all they care about is their own personal gain. They care not about the stones they throw, the tweets they post, the lives they ruin, or the negative image they use to describe the other – they care only about their own power – and they’re willing to take advantage of whoever it takes to maintain their power or to gain more power. There is no real relationship here – there is only an abuse of God’s desire for community. Such abuse of God’s desire is always at the perversion of God’s will.

### **Which leads us to our second relationship, that between the powerful and Jesus.**

As they stand before Jesus, trying to test the Lord, we find their power grab is a farce. Looking deeper into the story, we come to the reality that one cannot use another person for personal gain without being in contempt of God’s law. Jesus will not stand for such disregard of the law (no pun intended). What we find is that the Biblical law was not written to justify our actions, and so anytime we try to use the Biblical text to maintain our position of power, we are surely contradicting the very law we claim.

These Jewish leaders brought a woman caught in adultery before Jesus – but in doing so, they were, themselves, skirting the law. Surely these Jewish scholars knew that in the Law of Moses it is written, “If a man commits adultery with the wife of neighbor, both the adulterer and the adulteress shall be put to death.”<sup>iii</sup> Yet, they brought the woman and not the man. The law also mandates that two to three witnesses must be present to testify to the act for a death penalty to be carried out. Yet, these leaders seem to have no witnesses present to testify.

In an attempt to maintain personal power and to diminish Jesus, we find these leaders had to rely on abusing the Biblical law. The only way for us to claim power over Christ and over one another is to bear false witness to the testimony of God’s will and law. Yet, many still do this today. Too often we hear the misquoting and misappropriating of the Biblical text for the purpose of maintaining positions of power. That’s not to say that people don’t know the law – just as the lawyer in last week’s text knew the law good and well, he sought to justify himself by wondering, ‘Who is my neighbor?’ We tend to pick and choose what we want to follow, based on what will gain us the higher ground. People claim to be strong Christians and faithful witnesses to God’s law, yet they do not speak equally against all sin of the world because doing so would diminish their own power. Too often we find that Christians are willing to pick and choose the Scriptural texts that call out the faults of others while seemingly ignoring the texts that highlight the faults in their own lives.

Such unfaithful living puts us in the shoes of the scribes and the Pharisees of our story. And it’s clear, Jesus wants nothing to do with people who pervert the Biblical text for their personal gain. At such unfaithful living, Jesus disengages, bending down and drawing on the ground. Those who will take advantage of God’s law for their personal glory find themselves turned away from Christ, disengaged and ignored. The scribes and Pharisees turn and leave, one by one, at Christ wanting nothing to do with them.

### **Which leads us to the final relationship in the text, that of Jesus and the humble sinner.**

Up to now, Jesus hasn't even acknowledged the woman. She has not spoken, and Jesus has not spoken to her. The text indicates that Jesus treats her the same way he treated the leaders. From his crouched position, he straightens up and speaks to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" She speaks, "No one, sir." And so Jesus dismisses her, "Neither do I. Go your way, and from now on, sin no more."

The woman was brought before Jesus, and she knew she had done wrong. Jesus himself seems to acknowledge her sin, concluding the interaction by saying, 'go and sin no more.' But she comes with no intent to defend herself. She comes with no argument against the accusation. She was a vulnerable member of society who felt she could not even speak on her own behalf in defense. Yet, it is her who receives Jesus' pardon. It is her who encounters the healing nature of God's love. Instead of receiving great condemnation and being turned away, "[Jesus] encourages her to leave and live a life free of sin."<sup>iii</sup>

And I can't help but wonder, what would the world be like if we shared in this kind of healing love?

The brokenness of our personal relationships affects the way we see and interact with world at large. At any level, I'm convinced, the brokenness between humanity stems from our inability to be in authentic and healthy relationships with one another. The fractures of society exist because of our staunch individualism that always puts our self-glory at the center of conversations and decisions, even if it means abusing others and mistreating God's Word.

And so I wonder if the way we heal our relationships is to drop our rocks and realize we are all in need of Christ's pardon. I mean, let's be honest, we are really good at pointing fingers at other people's sin in an attempt to feel better about ourselves. Yet, regardless if you identify with the woman, who has her mistakes used and abused for the advantage of others; or if you identify as the scribes and Pharisees who are carrying around rocks with the intent of gaining personal power; or whether you identify as a bystander, who sees this encounter happening from afar – such abuse of God's word and such narcissistic manipulation of God's will has to stop. Because Christ has no desire to engage with those who knowingly take advantage of others. And perhaps that's part of our call, to stop giving voice to those who would abuse others and seek to gain personal power at the expense of God's truth. And perhaps it's part of our call to extend grace to those who are at fault as we all seek to go forth living a life free of sin.

For there is great healing needed in our relationships, and such interpersonal healing can lead to the healing of our world. So as Christ is our example, may we follow his lead, to cease in our desire to have power, to stop giving voice to those who would abuse others, and to acknowledge that our healing comes in the Lord, who extends the power of reconciling grace to each of us that we may live authentically and fully in relationship with one another. For the glory of God, may we be forgiven for the rocks we carry, that we may live in the example of Christ. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> W. Hall Harris III. *Exegetical Commentary on John 8*. [www.bible.org](http://www.bible.org). Retrieved March 6, 2018.

<sup>ii</sup> The Bible. NRSV. Leviticus 20:10.

<sup>iii</sup> Alicia D. Myers. *Feasting on the Gospels: John, Volume 1*. Eds. Cynthia A. Jarvis & E. Elizabeth Johnson. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015.

[A footnote about this text: Many commentators argue that John 7:53 – 8:11 shouldn't be in the Bible. If you go back to the original manuscripts from which the Bible was compiled, the earliest and best manuscripts omit this story. It shows up in some later manuscripts, but according to many scholars, the evidence against this story belonging in John is overwhelming.<sup>iv</sup> The story doesn't fit in with the rest of John's narrative. The grammar and vocabulary is quite different than you'll find elsewhere. In fact, in most Bible's, you'll see 7:53 - 8:11 published with brackets around it, indicating that the printing company believes it debatable as to whether or not the text belongs here. If you read from 7:52 straight to 8:12, skipping this story, the narrative of John flows perfectly well. Yet, for as much as its genuineness to John's Gospel is debated, scholars have offered that the text is authentic to the days of Jesus and that, even if out of place in the Biblical story, it is authentic to Jesus' teaching witness, and is thus still worth considering in our longing for faithful living.]

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<sup>iv</sup> Harris.