Living into the Tension…
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John 7:53-8:11, commonly referred to as “the woman caught in adultery,” is an irresistible story in Christian memory. It is commonly invoked and struggled over in the search for understanding the intersecting dynamics of grace, responsibility, and discipleship. It is a fascinating and vital part of the early church’s memory and testimony about Jesus.

It is made all the more fascinating because the early church did not seem to know quite where to put this story—how should it be preserved? Most modern Bible translations include a footnote to the reader that there is a discrepancy in the witness of ancient New Testament manuscripts about this passage. It was absent from what are considered some of the earliest and most reliable Greek manuscripts of John’s gospel. In others, it appears where we are most familiar with reading; in still other manuscripts it is found, not in John, but in the gospel of Luke after 24:53. (Other less supported placements of the story include after the following verses: John 7:36, John 21:25, and Luke 21:38.)

Writings from the third century—a sermon by Ambrose and the Didascalia (Teaching) of the Apostles and the fourth century’s Apostolic Constitutions reveal an awareness of this story, but do not tell us the source. The story gained canonical authority in the west in large measure due to Jerome’s decision to include the passage in the Vulgate (Latin translation)—while admitting that some of his sources did not include this passage. Its acceptance in the East was slower, but it did come to be established.

This story’s apparent oral authority, but uncertain place in the narrative of the gospels presents a challenge for our attempts to better understand its meaning. We frequently explore the context of a passage within a larger work to help shed light on the meaning that an author may have been intending readers to take from a story. This strategy fails us here, for the correct context is uncertain at best.

So, we are left with this story that plays on our hearts and imaginations. This ancient text without a clear literary context gets dragged into contemporary debates in the church over judgment and forgiveness, and grace and accountability. It was wrestled with a generation ago when the central question of the day was church membership for those who had been divorced and re-married. Today, the text is frequently invoked in struggling with questions of inclusion of persons of same sex orientation—particularly those who are in a same-sex relationship. In our context, this text gets caught in a now familiar tug of war. Advocates for greater inclusion find warrant for their vision in Jesus’ challenge to the condemning crowd—to measure their own hearts and action. None is found who has the purity to execute the judgment required by the law—this woman shall not be stoned. Let us take heed!

1 A good summary of the textual criticism of John 7:53-8:11 is available at: http://www.bible-researcher.com/adult.html
But, scarcely have the stones fallen to the ground, when those seeking to safeguard a disciplined discipleship remind—but Jesus also said—"Go and sin no more!" And while each “side” is certain that they have the spirit of the text—a standoff remains. This text as we have aligned ourselves around it holds us in tension that threatens to dissolve in division.

Perhaps, this is precisely the work that this word is to perform. Holding us in tension. Refusing resolution—but remaining with the tension, knowing that easy yielding to one side or the other may make losers of us all. There is a ditch on both sides of this road that must be taken seriously and examples are easily found (remembered) when the church seemed to veer into one ditch or the other.

There is another metaphor that may illuminate something about our struggles with this text. When I was young, at Boy Scout camp, we used to play at tug of war. A heavy rope was stretched over a sloppy, muddy pit with guys divided up at each end of the rope. The goal of this tug of war was to demonstrate your strength by pulling your weaker opponent through the mud. Victory was humiliation—a public spectacle made of the loser. Manhood was proven! (I don’t know if our sisters at Girl Scout Camp had any similar rituals.)

Which metaphor better characterizes the way you and I have participated in invoking this text? Has it been toward a shared wisdom that needs the tension between opposing perspectives to chart course between two potentially disastrous ditches or has it been a squaring off over this text that aims toward victory as humiliation. In this latter instance, it is now not our physical strength but our righteousness (or at least rightness) that is to be proven, while the other side is dragged through the rhetorical mud.

Perhaps, we already set ourselves up for such dilemma by nicknaming this text the story “of the woman caught in adultery.” Why this instead of remembering this story as “Jesus dismisses the crowd”? The first problem that Jesus appears to identify is not the judgment of the woman, but of the zealous religious community. They are ready to carry out the full requirement of the law—stone her! Make a public spectacle of her in her death—in the logic of the scapegoat—to cleanse us by removing her!

The woman indeed is told to “sin no more.” However, who hears these words? The account tells us, “Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him.” The source for this memory for the church was apparently either the woman or Jesus. No one else, as far as the text tells us, is left looking on or listening in when Jesus utters these words. These words uttered to the woman alone, refuse the dismissed crowd the right of a “gotcha”—Jesus still told you to sin no more. They were not permitted to hear these words—this commission by Jesus was not permitted to be an instrument of self-righteousness.

“Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?”
She said, “No one, sir.” And Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.”

Of late, in our debates, deliberations and attempts at discernment over questions of inclusion and membership in Mennonite Church USA, a new perspective is coming to the fore. This perspective is abandoning the strategies of tug of war, in favor of the shared work of not veering off the road. It is being demonstrated in the conversation between Reba Place Church and Chicago Community Mennonite Church. A similar conversation among leaders in Lancaster Conference is seeing that tension can be creative rather than inherently divisive.

I suspect that these and similar conversations springing up around the church is the beckoning of the Spirit of God. These conversations challenge the logic of tug of war and replace it with a shared work born of a conviction that we need one another to see more clearly.

More could be said, and certainly more will be said. But for this moment let us pause to consider—along with those from Reba Place and Community Mennonite of Chicago, of those from Lancaster exploring a radical center—what we learn from those with whom we differ. A truly missional church understands that its primary witness in the world begins with a cross-breached wall of hostility and that its Spirit-birthed unity is the only real witness that it has to the powers and principalities. Are we seeing the miracle of the wall of hostility once more being breached and a re-birth of a unity that we cannot simply manufacture—but that recasts our tensions as gift to be embraced and explored, rather than a struggle which one must win and another lose? I truly hope so.

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2 This conversation has resulted in a proposed resolution for consideration at the Mennonite Church USA assembly in Kansas City. The Chicago/Reba Resolution is found at: [http://mennoniteusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/10_Sexuality-Resolutions.pdf](http://mennoniteusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/10_Sexuality-Resolutions.pdf). The resolution and its background begin on page 3 of the document.

3 See “Radical Center” document. Available at: [https://themennonite.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/RadicalCenter-Revision-4-29-2015-1.pdf](https://themennonite.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/RadicalCenter-Revision-4-29-2015-1.pdf)

4 See Ephesians Chapter 2 and 3:10.