

A Clear Case

Sermon for the 4th Sunday after Trinity

Sermon Text: John 8: 3-11



³The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery, and placing her in the midst ⁴they said to Him, "Teacher, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery. ⁵Now in the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. So what do you say?" ⁶This they said to test Him, that they might have some charge to bring against Him. Jesus bent down and wrote with His finger on the ground. ⁷And as they continued to ask Him, He stood up and said to them, "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her." ⁸And once more He bent down and wrote on the ground. ⁹But when they heard it, they went away one by one, beginning with the older ones, and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before Him. ¹⁰Jesus stood up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" ¹¹She said, "No one, Lord." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more."

A clear case! That's what the pharisees at that time thought when they brought a woman before Jesus who had just been caught in the act of adultery. The Law of Moses was very clear in such cases. Such a person must die! Not only the woman, by the way, but also the man. But where the man was in this story, isn't mentioned. It was probably easier to kill a woman than a man because in those days, the life of a woman was considered less important than a man's. According to our modern understanding, this story is also completely clear. It's clear to us from the beginning whose side we're on. The pharisees, who wanted to kill a defenseless woman, are to us the guilty ones. Conversely, we have understanding for the woman who has fallen into sin. Likewise, today we also have understanding for people who commit adultery. We sympathize with people who didn't find happiness in their marriage and therefore became fascinated with another person. We have sympathy for the person who, in a weak moment, broke the bounds of marriage and abandoned their own marriage to be with another person. Even though adultery and infidelity cause terrible suffering for all people and especially for children who must grow up without a parent, we say that all of this is a part of life and that's just how people are. We learned to accept adultery. And that's why the question arises in the first place. Are we to think differently about the 6th Commandment than what Moses specified? We all agree that people

must not die because of adultery. But the question is, do we even need to say that the 6th Commandment is outdated and therefore we should think about it differently or not? Should we say that it is up to each person to decide, so to speak, who he or she lives with or not? And does the decision of a couple to separate also belong to the privacy of those involved? Should we say that all of this has absolutely no importance and that God is no longer interested in whether a marriage is dissolved or not? And the important question is, how does Jesus relate to all of this. What would Jesus say today about adultery? Because one thing in our story today is clear. It's about Jesus. He stands in the center. It's about what Jesus will say about adultery. And it's about what Jesus will say about forgiveness. But Jesus doesn't give us a chemically pure interpretation of the law about marriage at all. He doesn't tell the pharisees that they are right to follow through with the law of Moses nor does He tell them that the 6th Commandment has become invalid. Jesus didn't come to cancel the law. On the contrary, in another case, Jesus even took a particularly harsh view of the marriage law because, according to Jesus' law, adultery doesn't just happen when someone leaves their wife or husband and marries another person, but the mere thought of adultery is already adultery according to Jesus' understanding. Already, the desire of the heart makes one guilty. No, Jesus didn't overturn the marriage law nor did he lessen it nor did he abolish it. Jesus takes the marriage law, that is the 6th Commandment, very seriously. So the question here is: will Jesus judge or absolve the woman who was clearly guilty? If He absolved her, He would invalidate the 6th Commandment. But if He judged her, He would be merciless and the law would be loveless and harsh and would crush a person. By now, it is clear that the pharisees actually have no interest in this woman. They also have no interest in the 6th Commandment that she broke. Instead, the pharisees are interested in stopping Jesus. They wanted to place a case before Jesus so that it would be clear to everyone that Jesus is not the Messiah and that He is not God's Son. The pharisees wanted to entrap Jesus and not the woman. And their plan is very clear: they already knew from the beginning that Jesus is full of love and mercy and that He doesn't want to condemn sinners. That was just the one side. It was equally clear that the pharisees knew just as well that Jesus honored and respected God's Law. He would never overrule the 6th Commandment about marriage. They thought that they had the perfect trap: if Jesus were to condemn the woman and have her stoned, He would discredit the Law of Love. But if He were to absolve this woman, the 6th Commandment would be discredited. So the pharisees thought they would catch Jesus cold and that they had set a trap for Him that He wouldn't be able to get out of. What is the outcome of this story? The outcome of this story is that those who wanted to judge became the lawbreakers. The judges turned into the accused. At first, Jesus says nothing but simply writes in the sand. Perhaps He listed the pharisees' sins. Or maybe He wrote down the 10 Commandments there in the sand. In any case, it was clear when Jesus stood up and spoke His Word of power: "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her!" Every single one of them was affected and one after the other, the stones fell to the ground. That is an extremely impressive story. The secret of this story is hidden in the fact that the judges, in a single moment, become guilty or at least complicit. Because what we see here is that these same judges had no right being judges! Jesus doesn't negate the law. Jesus doesn't say that from now on, adultery is no longer valid. He just says that people have absolutely no right to judge and accuse. Only God has this right. Jesus very clearly shows that not only this woman committed adultery, but also all the others who were standing around. And if they didn't commit adultery, then they committed a variety of other sins. And it is not right for one guilty person to condemn other guilty people. That applies to us too. We may not judge. In the history of the Christian Church, there have always been these terrible stories of people taking the right to elevate themselves over others and pronounce judgement. Jesus shows us in this story that this will not do! Whoever stands under God's judgment as a sinner, should not presume to judge another sinner! We may not condemn anyone! Unfortunately, I constantly see, even among us Christians, the temptation to judge each other. For example, one person says to another, "Oh, this person or that person is not really a Christian. He or she just got baptized to gain asylum!" How do you know that? Can you look into peoples' hearts? And even if it is true, then do you have the right to make such a judgement? Who is to say that such people who get baptized for asylum don't come to faith later on?

It's clear from this story that we all stand before Jesus. Our place is not in the judge's chair. Our place is in the defendant's stand. Interestingly, Jesus doesn't get into a discussion over how big of a sinner the person is and, accordingly, He doesn't negotiate over the punishment. For instance, He doesn't say, "I acknowledge that the woman sinned but the death sentence is a little too harsh. Let's reduce it a little!" No, Jesus lets the full severity of the Law apply and just says that the people have no right to judge, only God can do that. But the story doesn't change there where the

pharisees, one by one, throw their stones to the ground and run away. The story continues. It continues now with the sinful woman and Jesus. She now stands alone before Jesus. The fate of this sinful woman is not yet clear. It is clear that she now stands before the only One who can judge. Jesus had the right to judge. Jesus asked the woman, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" And she loudly answers, "No one." Jesus' answer is surprisingly simple: "Neither do I condemn you." Jesus doesn't say: "you have sinned, that's correct, now you should pay a lot of money as proof that you have repented! Or you must do many good works so I can see if you truly want to lead a good life or not from now on!" No, His forgiveness is completely unconditional. "Neither do I condemn you!" Jesus leaves the woman with just this simple sentence - "go, and from now on sin no more."

Jesus Christ risked giving a woman caught in sin another chance. Unconditionally. Jesus has always done just that. Jesus risked coming into our world even when it meant death for Him. That gives me no right at all – neither to trample upon God's Commandments nor to raise pointed fingers to judge others. But with trembling hands, I let the stones of accusation fall, get on my knees, and pray: "Lord, have mercy!" Amen.