

Writing in the Sand

Text: Psalm 103: 6-13; John 8: 1-11

Rev. Dr. C. Geordie Campbell

May 1, 2016

Horace Bushnell, a man very well acquainted with our parts of Connecticut, comes with me today. He was heard to say to his congregation, and far more than once: "the Gospel is a gift to the imagination."¹ Which is another way of saying that the stories we are given of and about Jesus are not fixed, rigid and unbending, rather, they are invitational, flexible and curious.

So imagine this scene as John's Gospel tells us a story. It was early in the day, hours before the sweltering heat of the afternoon would arrive. Word was afoot that Jesus was around and so a crowd of people was gathering around the temple in Jerusalem. They were eager just to see and hear him in real-time.

Just as Jesus began to teach a ruckus arose. As if on cue the religious leaders of the day, the scribes and the Pharisees, burst the edges of the crowd and commanded everyone's attention. They had literally in hand and, by the way, not very gently, a woman who had been caught in the ancient practice of adultery.

But Jesus knew right up front that the ruckus wasn't really about the woman. She was merely a foil to corner and trap him into a public statement of moral judgment. The powers that be were not about to be upstaged by the carpenter from Nazareth. And they knew he would take their bait and it would place himself squarely on their turf and under the jurisdiction of their authority. It was a "gotcha" moment waiting to happen.

"The law commands that we stone her," they said. "What do you think?" Jesus knew better and deeper. For one thing, Mosaic Law would have never have presented just one party of the questionable relationship. She was there but where was he? And even more, if stoning was called for it was the man who would be the first recipient.²

Then look what happened. Jesus responded to them by squatting down and scratching some words in the dust. (It might interest you to know that this is the only occasion in any of the Gospels in which we have Jesus writing anything so it's worthy of notice and pause.)

At first the crowd fell silent - like somebody had pushed the mute button on the remote. And they all watched as this clever attempt to trap him turned into a lesson so much larger. It quickly shifted from the infraction of one person to all of them, waiting, watching, wondering.

I can't help but imagine that, even if without words, they wanted to know: '*what on earth is he writing?*' Was he doing some sort of complex ethical algebra? Was he

simply trying to ignore them, unwilling to fall into the net they had set? Were there equations of proper norms and behaviors that he needed to weigh? Was he merely buying time to conjure a response or even doodling to disregard them entirely?³

And then, after who knows how long, he stood back up. The questioning and badgering of the authorities still rippled and murmured. He looked around at all of them before he spoke: "The sinful ones among: you – go first! Throw the first stone." And he bent down again and started to write more.

Inquiring minds have speculated over the years. Some sources posit that Jesus was writing down the sins of every one of them - the scribes and Pharisees and religious leaders first, and then all the rest. And that somehow in this suspended moment he was calling every one of them to account for their hardness of heart.

Brian Doyle wrote a poignant piece for *Christian Century* entitled *Confessio*.⁴ He was imagining writing in the dust of his own life just like Jesus did that day. Among his words are these: "I, Brian, a sinner, a most simple suburbanite, a generally decent sort but subject to fits of unrelieved selfishness. I have, with little conscience, set higher standards for others that I am able to sustain myself. I have taken my lovely bride for granted thinking that she would have to endure me because I was her husband. I have gossiped, I admit it. I have made snap judgments based on appearance and jumped to conclusions based on no evidence at all. I've stolen shampoo and notepads and pens from hotels – I even snatched off with a Gideon's bible. I have applauded myself with dark remarks, and amused myself at the expense of others under the guise of laughter."

And then, still imagining. As Jesus continued to write on the ground he heard something. It was the sound of stones dropping. Stones that had been intended for the frenzy of punishing a woman who had now become the very center of the lesson that they had, every last one of them, sinned in some way, at some time, distant or near.

They had *heard* him! "Go on! Throw the first stone!" And given that indictment none of them could do it. So starting with the elders and the scribes and the leaders of the synagogue the stones began to fall. Plunk! Some loud. Clump! Some soft. Plop! Stone after stone after stone. Thud!

They all went away empty handed. Some no doubt felt relieved, and others perturbed. Some felt freed up and amazed at his powerful teaching, as a few others perhaps tried to figure out how he escaped their seamless plot to trap him.

One after another after another sauntered away until it was only the woman and Jesus. He straightened up for a second time and asked, "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 sin no more."

Back to those words of Horace Bushnell. The Gospel is a gift to the imagination. Wherever this imagining reaches into your life and touches you today, if anywhere at all, pay attention. Wherever it invites you to deeper understanding about yourself and others, take a step. Wherever it reminds you, as it does me, that Jesus knows us so much better than even we know ourselves, take heart.

And with all of this come now, come to the table that awaits us. For all things are now ready. Amen.

© 2016 Charles Geordie Campbell.

First Church
12 South Main Street
West Hartford, CT 06107

¹ Robert Edwards. Of Singular Genius, of Singular Grace: a Biography of Horace Bushnell. Pilgrim Press, 1993.

² Gerald Sloyan. Interpretation Biblical Commentary: John. John Knox Press, 1988, p. 97.

³ Leander Keck, ed. The New Interpreter's Bible, Volume IX: Luke and John. Abingdon Press, 1995, p. 629.

⁴ Brian Doyle. "Confessio" in Christian Century, August 22, 2012, p. 13.