



If a Bible Story Could End a Culture War: *John 8 and Prop 8*

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As in the past, California's November 2008 election results offered a decidedly mixed message. Obama's "Yes we can!" message prevailed handily here, but Proposition 8's "No you can't" also won. The latter ballot measure aimed to change the state's constitution to prohibit same gender marriage, despite the fact that the state Supreme Court had upheld this right.

If California is a bellwether for social and political trends in the North America, then the passage of Prop 8 is a troubling barometer indeed, since it proposes to *contract* rather than expand existing civil rights for the first time in U.S. history.

Prop 8 was driven largely by the conservative religious community, which pumped up the issue into an epic battle to save the institution of marriage, if not western civilization itself. Not only did these churchly proponents miss the point of democracy, in my opinion; they also missed the point of the gospel. That point is perhaps best made by an old story in scripture, which I counter-pose as the "proposition" of John 8.

John 8:3-11 is something of a step-child in the tradition, having been relegated by scholars, because of weak manuscript attestation, to second class canonical status as a later addition, thus it is bracketed in newer editions of the New Testament. But this wise tale, which reflects some of the earliest church's thinking on marriage laws and morés, deserves attention from anyone

wishing to find their way to a different kind of discourse on such matters today.

The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery; and making her stand before all of them, they said to Jesus, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him. (John 8:3-6a, NRSV)

What we have here is a slam dunk case, a show trial. This poor woman's crime is uncontested—she's been caught *in flagrante delicto*. (The implication is positively salacious: how did they discover her? This is the stuff of tabloid justice.) True to the tradition of patriarchal law, the male offender is invisible. Perhaps he settled out of court, or more likely, went Scott free—you know, boys will be boys!

As for the defendant, the verdict is in, and the law is clear: death by stoning. But the authorities parade her through one more public humiliation because they're after Jesus, too. They want to root out the moral rot, so both sinners *and* their suspected sympathizers must be denounced. This scenario is all too reminiscent of a Presbyterian

plebiscite, a Methodist conference floor fight, or a Catholic *pronunciamiento* today on the issue of homosexuality. As one victim of such contemporary ecclesial purges said to me, it's "ethic cleansing."

I LOVE what happens next in John's story.

Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, 'Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.' And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground.. When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders; and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. (John 8:6b-9)

The rabbi says nothing. Instead, he stoops to write something on the ground. When the prosecutors persist in pressing him to reveal his position, he stands up and invites those "without sin" to commence distributing justice. Then he resumes noodling in the sand.

This bending-rising-bending is so dramatic, so evocative. Modeling flexibility perhaps—of the body, for the body politic? Moreover, Jesus' finger is the only one *not* pointing in this scenario. It is instead scratching out a mysterious message, perhaps prophetic graffiti, like Daniel's "handwriting on the wall" (Dan. 5:5ff). We are, however, neither shown nor told what Jesus writes. It is a delicious moment, puzzling and wry all at once.

One by one, the crowd dissipates. Not jurors recusing themselves here, but judges! The prosecution has collapsed. Clear the courtroom!

"And Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him." The one who the authorities "forced to stand before all of them" is, well, *still standing*. After all the

drama—the character assassination and the moralizing and the head wagging—she's somehow upright. Just like so many of those through the centuries who by reasons of race, class, gender or sexual orientation have endured dominant culture scapegoating, baiting, second class citizenship, social

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invisibility, silencing and exclusion: she is battered, bruised, but unbowed.

Jesus straightened up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" She said, "No one, sir." (John 8:10-11)

Rising for a second time, Jesus engages the woman directly, dignifying her as a subject. (Rarely do our ecclesial "discernment committees" bother to talk *to* the sexual minorities they are discussing.) He asks her—rather dryly I'm thinking—about the sudden disappearance of her accusers. Finally the defendant gets a word in edgewise: "No sir, they done flew the coop."

NOW comes the moment in our story that any church in moral quandary or ethical debate putatively longs for. In bumper sticker parlance: WWJD? The One who Christian "orthocrats" deem to be "without sin" is about to issue his official ruling on

this matter. Here at last is Jesus' unequivocal guidance on the issue that the Prop 8 folk deem to be our moral watershed; it's God's own edict concerning the boundaries of marriage law, free of cultural static. Let's settle this hash once and for all.

"Neither do I condemn you."

The point is, none of us is without sin. And the counterpoint, thankfully, is that none of us is without grace.

The Greek verb here (*katakrinō*), which appears twice in John's punch line, is important. It is the same one employed by the apostle Paul in his famous argument for divine grace in Romans 1–2. This is germane because it is there that we find a verse (Rom. 1:26f) that is used incessantly and "authoritatively" by the Christian morality tsars to beat up homosexuals. But they have missed the apostle's point entirely. In fact, Paul's conclusion in Rom 2:1 sounds very much like Jesus' in John 8:

You are without excuse, whoever you are who would judge, for in passing judgment on the other, you condemn (*katakrineis*) yourself, because you are practicing the very same things!

The point is, none of us is without sin. And the counterpoint, thankfully, is that none of us is without grace. Paul's subsequent argument in Romans 6–8 culminates with the extraordinary and unequivocal declaration: "There is therefore no condemnation (*katakrima*) for those who are in Christ Jesus!" (Rom. 8:1).

This does not, however, appear to be the faith of those who invoke the apostle to

condemn and exclude gays and lesbians. Instead, constitutional amendments and righteous resolutions and threatened church splits fly like stones, with intent to kill.

John's story ends abruptly with Jesus' simple invitation to a fresh start: "Go your way, and from now on do not sin again." The Divine guidance we've been waiting for turns out to be what Elsa Tamez calls "the amnesty of grace." Restorative justice trumps retributive legalism. The moral of the story: the one prerequisite to rendering judgment is *self-examination*. Case closed.

John's portrait of the authorities gathering to "execute justice" (that grimmest of double entendres) represents a scenario that has been repeated *ad nauseum* in the history of Christendom but without the happy ending. Jesus' response unmasks the two essential characteristics that underlie the theology and politics of condemnation. One is the presumption that one's own position on the issue is normative. The other is a distinct lack of humility. Both are necessary to sustain any effort to render another person or group inferior or expendable, and both lead inevitably to ideologies, practices, and policies of dehumanization.

It is a depressingly old script in the long, bloody history of discrimination—whether because of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, disability, religion or any other form of "categorical exclusion." No matter how painfully polite or putatively pious the exclusionists may be, dehumanization is the spiritual and psychological result. This script certainly isn't unique to Christianity, but we Christians should rightly be troubled by its ubiquity and persistence in our tradition.

I BELIEVE the gospel calls us to far more than merely "including" those different than us. To be "open and affirming" is neither "tolerance" nor a "don't ask don't tell" delicacy. Reconstructing our churches as safe



havens for those wounded by exclusion is necessary, but not alone sufficient. Jesus calls for a fierce solidarity that seeks to defend the outcast against all forms of re-victimization. In terms of John's story, this would mean helping the exonerated defendant continue to stand in the aftermath of her horrific, near-death trauma, and accompanying her through the inevitable backlash and isolation. That is the pastoral task.

The prophetic task of "affirmation" is militant engagement with the theology of exclusion as a false gospel. We must be more evangelical and more biblical than our adversaries. After all, it is the theology of welcome that represents the good news today, not the politics of condemnation. We dare not be timid, for it is both a responsibility and a privilege to stand with those despised, "whose angels stand ever before the face of God," as Jesus remarkably puts it in Matthew 18:10.

BUT there is one more, inconvenient, thing to be said about John 8. This text immediately circles around and cracks back on those of us whose impulse is to condemn those who are condemning. How quick we are to replicate the very characteristics this story exposes—to "absolutize" our own position, and to jettison humility in our righteous advocacy. We love to imagine—at least in our hearts—the excommunication of our enemies. But as soon as we start reaching for stones to hurl, Jesus gets ready to switch sides.

This story's wildly circulating grace confounds *all* our attempts to redraw the lines of "in" and "out." We should not be too sure of ourselves, because we have a long way to go to truly embody solidarity with the outcast, and we have too many blind spots. Moreover, we also have to figure out what it means to "sin no more." Issues of ethical behavior remain after inclusion has been secured.

As for humility, we heterosexual allies of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) Christians could start by asking why it took *us* so long—both as individuals and as institutions—to take our stand with folks who were enduring marginalization long before we showed up. It seems to me that

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part of the self-examination to which Jesus invites everyone in John 8 is to acknowledge that we are all on a journey to deeper and wider communion. We are on the road, not at the destination, and no one is beyond the reach of grace. As Gandhi put it, even our adversaries have part of the truth; as Martin Luther King put it, they too must have a place in the Beloved Community.

Still, let us never forget that even as we are struggling to open the church up, others are trying to shut it down. With Prop 8, that archetypal crowd gathered yet again, fulminating about "traditional values" and ready to rumble over secular polity and canon law. The guardians of propriety once again targeted the LGBT community as its scapegoat to put on parade. So let us deepen our pastoral and prophetic work of solidarity.

But let us also stay ever mindful that amidst all the drama, Jesus is stooped down, taking notes in the dust. When he stands up, we'd *all* better run for the mirror. ♦

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