# SERMON SERIES: A JOURNEY OF STONES

**“Sticks & Stones”**

## *John 8:1-11*

(adapted from *Journey of Stones: A Sermon Series for Lent and Easter* by Steven Molin

CSS Publishing Company, 2002; pp. 23-26)

Today is the second Sunday in Lent, the season in the life of the church where we focus on confession, repentance and self-denial. The sermon series we’re using is entitled “A Journey Of Stones.” We began last week by carrying a stone into worship with us—a stone that represented Jesus as the true cornerstone. At the conclusion of the service we were asked to reflect on whether or not Jesus is, in fact, the real cornerstone of our lives, or whether we tend to treat him more like a Pet Rock. As an act of confession, we were asked to lay our stone on the altar if we were guilty of rejecting Jesus as our cornerstone.

Let’s turn to our Scripture reading for this morning, John 8:1-11. As you’re doing that, if you did not pick up a stone as you entered worship today, please raise your hand and our ushers will bring you one. Everyone should have a stone with them today.

***How many of you can remember some of the playground phrases you used as children? I’m going to begin a few and ask you to finish them up:***

***“Liar, liar…” [pants on fire].***

***“Cross my heart…” [and hope to die, stick a needle in my eye].***

***“Mitch and Suzie sitting in a tree…” [K-I-S-S-I-N-G].***

***“We want a pitcher…” [not a belly itcher].***

***And then there’s this one: “Sticks and stones…” [may break my bones, but words can never hurt me].***

Now we know from personal experience that words can and do hurt us deeply. Yet we tell our children: “Don’t pay any attention to what someone else says. Remember: sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt you.” But we learn at a very early age that it’s not true. Words hurt, badly.

***A teenage girl walks by a group of boys and one of them says, “Hey, Cassie’s getting a little chunky, don’t you think? Oink! Oink! Oink!” Cassie hurries by and heads to the nearest restroom and melts into tears. In the future, she’ll pay countless visits to that restroom—not to cry—but to purge and vomit out the salad and rice cakes she just ate for lunch.***

***Or a father carelessly calls his son “lazy” or “stupid” or “useless.” The boy doesn’t seem to care; he just slinks off to his bedroom, puts on his headphones, turns up his iPhone—but inside, a little piece of him dies of humiliation and rejection. “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never…yeah… Yeah, they will hurt. They will cause untold damage.***

Imagine for a moment how you might feel if several members of this congregation came up to you, took you by the arms, brought you to the front, and proceeded to tell the congregation a sin you committed during the week. Shocking to think about, isn’t it? Talk about humiliation, rage and shame. Now what if everyone in the congregation was armed with a rock, and was ready to hurl them at you because of your sin? That’s what happened in our Scripture reading.

*1Jesus returned to the Mount of Olives, 2but early the next morning he was back again at the Temple. A crowd soon gathered, and he sat down and taught them. 3As he was speaking, the teachers of religious law and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in the act of adultery. They put her in front of the crowd.*

*4“Teacher,” they said to Jesus, “this woman was caught in the act of adultery. 5The law of Moses says to stone her. What do you say?”*

*6They were trying to trap him into saying something they could use against him, but Jesus stooped down and wrote in the dust with his finger. 7They kept demanding an answer, so he stood up again and said, “All right, but let the one who has never sinned throw the first stone!” 8Then he stooped down again and wrote in the dust.*

*9When the accusers heard this, they slipped away one by one, beginning with the oldest, until only Jesus was left in the middle of the crowd with the woman. 10Then Jesus stood up again and said to the woman, “Where are your accusers? Didn’t even one of them condemn you?”*

*11“No, Lord,” she said. And Jesus said, “Neither do I. Go and sin no more.”*

Early one morning Jesus was teaching in the temple when the Pharisees poured in, dragging with them a disheveled woman. Scripture doesn’t say whether or not she was clothed. It’s likely that she was since devout Pharisees wouldn’t even look at a woman on the street, much less haul a naked one into the temple! But then again, Scripture says that she *was caught in the act of adultery.* So who knows? Maybe she was barely covered by a cloak, clutching it to her, trembling and frightened beyond belief.

“Teacher,” the Pharisees declared, “this woman was caught sleeping with a man who is not her husband. The law of Moses--which our entire society and religious faith is built upon--says that a woman such as this is to be executed. Tell us what you think.”

“A woman such as *this*.” How that label must have stung her. Those words undoubtedly hurt her like the bite of a whip: “A woman such as *THIS*.” And just in case she missed the condemnation, perhaps there were onlookers in the crowd who piled on additional insults: “She’s a slut! She’s trash, a home-wrecker! Put her to death! Stone her!” We might be inclined to think that the stoning had already started... She was already dying a slow and shameful death, pitched half-naked into the middle of a crowd, surrounded by scowling and hateful Pharisees. “Sticks and stones may break my bones…”

***It’s been said that the church is the only army in the world that shoots its own wounded,*** and that’s just what was transpiring in the temple court. Dozens of hands picked up jagged or blunt stones. Dozens of eyes were fixed on her trembling, weeping form.

But one pair of eyes refused to stare. Jesus kept his gaze on the ground, refusing to add to her humiliation. How it must have grieved Jesus to see a daughter of Abraham, a child of God, treated with such contempt. So what did he do?

It’s interesting that Jesus didn’t enter into a philosophical or theological debate with the Pharisees about the proper application of Mosaic law. He didn’t ask the crowd to take a vote. If you notice, he didn’t even ask the woman to tell her side of the story. Instead, he knelt down and drew in the dirt. Rather than engaging the hostile Pharisees who …*were trying to trap him into saying something they could use against him—*isn’t it interesting how a lot of religious people are always looking for a way to trap or belittle someone else?; rather than address the crowd; rather than asking for her defense—Jesus took all the attention off of her and put it on himself. We don’t know what he wrote in the dirt that morning, but we do know he was trying to aid this woman by turning the focus away from her.

“Okay, you guys want to know what I think,” Jesus said. “Here’s my judgment…” Can’t you just imagine the tension in the air at that moment? The Pharisees eagerly awaited the opportunity to issue the death penalty, the crowd with stones in their hands, Jesus slowly standing up…

“If there’s a single person here who has never committed a sin, you may cast the first stone. If you’re perfect, go ahead and let’em fly! If your life is without one hint of sin, you can get this execution started.” *8Then he stooped down again and wrote in the dust.* *9When the accusers heard this, they slipped away one by one, beginning with the oldest…*As we age, it seems we become more aware of our own shortcomings and more honest about our failures. So the eldest Pharisees were the first to slip away. And as the younger Pharisees saw their mentors and elders leaving, they took the cue and also left the scene as well.

Now according to the law of Moses, technically, the woman did deserve to die. Leviticus 20:10 said, *If a man commits adultery with his neighbor’s wife, both the man and the woman who have committed adultery must be put to death.* It was really a clear-cut case against her. She had, after all, been caught in the act (which also makes you wonder just why the Pharisees were lurking outside her window in order to catch her…). But on this particular morning, compassion won out. This time, love was more powerful than justice and the law.

*10Then Jesus stood up again and said to the woman, “Where are your accusers? Didn’t even one of them condemn you?”*

*11“No, Lord,” she said. And Jesus said, “Neither do I. Go and sin no more.”*

If this story were to happen today, I fear that we would be cast in the role of the Pharisees. We like to insulate ourselves from the “real sinners” of the world by our pious speech and self-righteous attitudes. In truth, it would be our hands that would be filled with stones. And we would be ready to launch them at whoever didn’t think, or act, or worship, or speak, or vote, or believe the way we do.

The word *Pharisee* literally means “people who have separated themselves.” And that’s what we do, isn’t it? We take pride in the fact that we’re not like those who steal, cook up meth, sleep around, drink too much, or won’t work. We consider ourselves better than them.

Jesus did not say the woman was innocent. In fact, he told her to take advantage of this second chance and stop her life of sin. But he did imply that she deserved compassion--not wrath--from those who were ready to kill her.

Over two thousand years after the fact, we readily admit that Jesus was right--that the woman deserved a second chance. And yet we remain harshly critical of people just like her in our day--people who make mistakes and break the rules. We’re willing to absolve her of her first century indiscretion, but we condemn the twenty-first century sinners. We resent and object to the conniving, cruel, and self-righteous actions of the Pharisees—but we continue to carry on the selfsame tradition of rejection and condemnation.

So loaded with stones—or words—or attitudes—we are more than happy to launch the first volley. In short, we have met the Pharisees, and they are us! Rigid. Religious. Insensitive. And wrong.

The stones that we have in our possession this morning are symbolic of the words we are ready to judge and condemn someone else with. They represent the attitudes that we have already targeted someone else with. They represent our self-deluded religious superiority, our bigotry, our disapproval of those who sin differently than we do.

If you are here today and you have never sinned, you are invited to take your stone home with you. The rest of us are invited to bring our stones forward and place them on the altar. You may also want to spend a few moments in prayer at the altar. And as it did that day in Jerusalem two thousand years ago, perhaps it might begin with the eldest among us. Amen.