

## **Discerning Joy**

John 8:1–20

The story of the woman caught in adultery is odd. It's a beautiful story, don't get me wrong, but when you read John straight through, you'll notice that this story doesn't belong here. It is plopped between the discourse of Jesus with the Pharisees at the temple where he claims to be the source of Living Water and the Light of the world. Most scholars think that this story was written by Luke and belongs in that gospel more than it belongs here in John. And yet, it has been maintained there over centuries (millennia, really) of Christian thought and worship.

Why is it here? What purpose does it serve?

Perhaps it reminds us that, even in the middle of Jesus' discourses with the argumentative Pharisees, that he is a compassionate and loving God. That his primary purpose on earth is to see and *love* people. That he comes not to judge but to show mercy to those who kneel before him.

The teachers of the Law set a trap for Jesus: If Jesus condemned the woman to death, the Romans would be upset, because the Jews did not have the legal authority to execute anyone, but if Jesus set the woman free, the Jewish leaders could claim that he was a false teacher who ignored the details of the Law. (Never mind that the man caught in adultery is roaming entirely free somewhere, though the Law also condemned him to death... something that the Jewish teachers conveniently forget when they bring the woman to Jesus.)<sup>1</sup>

Jesus sidesteps the trap neatly, turning the tables and asking the accusers to identify their own holiness and sinlessness; of course, even they aren't arrogant enough to claim sinlessness, and one by one, they walk away, until only Jesus is left standing; only Jesus has the authority remaining to cast stones, but he doesn't.

"You judge by human standards," Jesus says to the Pharisees, "I pass judgment on no one."<sup>2</sup> Then he invokes (again!) the witness of the Father, who sent him.<sup>3</sup> "If you knew me, you would know my Father also."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Lev 20:10, Deut 22:22

<sup>2</sup> Jn 8:15, NIV

<sup>3</sup> Jn 8:16

<sup>4</sup> Jn 8:19, NIV

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If you don't know Jesus, you don't know God. If we think that Jesus came to condemn our sin, we've got another think coming, because when given the opportunity to do so, Jesus offers mercy instead.

How on earth does this connect to our Advent theme of JOY?

We are deep in the Advent season now, which is all about waiting and looking to Jesus as our hope and joy in this present world as we look forward to him coming again. However, the ways in which we celebrate Christmas all too often reflect our hope and joy in the present world (full-stop) with Jesus as a by-blow, an afterthought. Oh yeah, I suppose Christmas is about Jesus, so maybe we should read the Christmas story somewhere in there. But only *after* we open presents, play games, and eat lots of food... right?

But what if *this* story—this *Jesus story*—defined our celebration? What if the quiet manger moments, the awe of angels singing, and the eager pursuit of this coming Saviour by the shepherds is what guided us, rather than buying more and more and more, wrapping more presents, baking more Christmas goods, decorating more and more, trying to one-up what we gave our loved ones last year, and frantically filling our calendars with one Christmas party, concert, or family gathering?

What if we... stopped? What if we said no?

John Mark Comer says, "You need to learn the art of saying no. To good things. A smart man once said, 'Good is the enemy of best.'"<sup>5</sup> *Good is the enemy of best*. Many of these holiday things are *good* things, but *too many* good things are still not good. What if we chose only the *best* things rather than *all* the good things?

The woman caught in adultery was caught in her sin. Most of our sins are far more insidious, taking the form of time-robbers and attention-grabbers. The man who was participating in the act was let off scot free, not because he was innocent, but because the leaders didn't identify his actions as sin; they were normative. Accepted, even, by societal standards.

What sins have become normative in our lives?

We have normalized having over-busy schedules, frantic lives hopping from work to school to extracurricular activities and back again; we spend money like water on things we don't need, filling houses that have more space than we need, buying the latest fashions that we don't need, the newest iPhone that we don't need, the latest video game that we don't need; we equate expensive gifts with love; we attend family gatherings out of obligation,

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<sup>5</sup> Comer, *Garden City*, 144.

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exhausting ourselves by cooking way more food than we need. Every culture has its blind spots, and our sins of distraction, gluttony, envy, over-indulgence, and consumerism are ours.

John Mark Comer says, “When all we do is consume, no matter how great it is, after a while we feel empty.”<sup>6</sup>

Now, hear me plainly: *God gives us good things*. He has given us the creativity to build smartphones and computers, to buy beautiful homes, to spend time with loved ones, and to enjoy how others are filling his world with good things.

My husband’s grandma passed away this year. One of her favourite sayings was, “Everything in moderation.” Of course, this was usually in response to whatever food fad or diet was currently being debated by the family. But the statement is true; there are no evil *things*. Smartphones, Netflix, YouTube videos, reels, designer clothes, postsecondary education, food, travel to exotic locations, spending time with family—these are simply *things*; they are neither good nor evil in and of themselves.

It's not the act of sex that condemned the woman; it was that her act was misplaced outside of the bounds of marriage. She and her partner took something that had been created by God and distorted it so that it hurt themselves, their spouses, and their community.

It's *how* we use these things—food, education, hobbies, sex, friends, family—that determines whether it is good or evil. Everything thrives within its God-given boundaries, and it becomes distorted when we try to expand it beyond where it belongs.

So *how* do we know whether something is within its God-given boundaries or whether it has been distorted?

This is what we call *discernment*. We weigh our actions on the scale of whether it is good and life-giving. And then we act accordingly.

For the past two years, Troy and I have taught spiritual formation practices to teenagers at Gull Lake’s Leadership Training and Discipleship program. In our session on discernment, I gave them three questions to ask themselves to discern whether something is God-honouring or not.

First, does it love God and does it love others? We hold up our actions to the words of Jesus “‘You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind.’ This

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<sup>6</sup> Comer, *Garden City*, 168.

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is the first and greatest commandment. A second is equally important: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”<sup>7</sup> If the thing harms another person, you may need to rethink it.

Second, God is good and delights in good things. In the very first chapter of Genesis, we read that “God looked over all he had made, and he saw that it was very good!”<sup>8</sup> Is the thing that you are doing *very good*? More than good, is it *best*—for you, your family, your community?

Third, the things we choose to participate in either *forms* us to look more like Jesus or *deforms* us to look less like him. Does the thing make me look more like Jesus or less like Jesus? Does it bring hope, peace, joy, and love to me and to others?

*One by one, the woman’s accusers walked away.* Their accusations did not hold up to these questions.

Think for a moment on your life right now. And because it is the Christmas season, think about your Christmas traditions and how you feel about Christmas.

Which traditions bring you joy? Which things fill you with love for God and others, remind you of the good that God has created, and form you to look more like Jesus? Is it decorating the Christmas tree with loved ones? Buying gifts for others or receiving gifts, because this is how you experience love? Enjoying good food? Playing games? Lighting candles? Attending a Christmas Eve service? Asking someone who is alone this Christmas to join your celebration? Is it caroling? Watching Christmas movies? Baking goodies?

Discernment takes time and practice. And remember, sometimes the hardest discernment is between the *good* and the *best* things. The difficulty is that we think that we can do all things for all people. We don’t want to let anyone down, after all. But the difficulty is that we stretch ourselves so very thin that we have *less* to give than if we said no to a few key things.

Does it love God and love others? Is it good? Does it form you to be more like Jesus or deform you to be less like Jesus? If you can answer yes to all three questions, then keep the tradition. Do the thing and find joy in it!

For many of us, the Christmas season is a time of exhilaration and great joy. But for others, it is a time of darkness, sorrow, and anxiety as we strive to live up to the expectations of the perfect holiday season, or we grieve our loved ones lost.

It’s worth asking, which Christmas tradition sucks the joy right out of you? Which things stretch you away from loving God and others, focus your thoughts on stress and

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<sup>7</sup> Matt 22:37–39, NIV

<sup>8</sup> Gen 1:31, NLT

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overwhelm, or deform you to look less like Jesus? Is it shopping at the mall in December? Putting up the lights or the tree? Buying gifts for every member of your family? Toiling away in the kitchen so that your people have a fantastic feast... and you're exhausted? Is it the thought of being alone on Christmas? Is it caroling? Watching Christmas movies? Baking goodies?

Does it love God and others? Is it good? Does it form you to be more like Jesus or deform you to be less like Jesus—tired, anxious, stressed, overwhelmed? If the answer to any of these is no, then perhaps the thing requires reevaluation.

Smack in the middle of our passage today, Jesus declares that *he* is the light of the world. For a light to be seen, there needs to be at least some darkness. Some stillness. We must let our lights and crazy lives grow dimmer so that *his* light shines brighter. It's not about *my* light. It's not about everything that *I* can do to make others happy. Christmas is about *Jesus*; *it is about the hope, peace, joy, and love* that he brings to the world.

It is not, quite frankly, about how many fun things you can fit into your holiday season or how perfect it is, because we all know that there will be that one grumpy child, that uncle who argues politics, the giant mess in the kitchen to clean up afterward, and the drain of an emptied bank account for the sake of a few moments of happiness.

It is a personal observation that I have made that the tighter that we hold onto the things around us, the less joy we have. The more we try to do, the less peace we have. The more we try to please everyone around us, the more frazzled, angry, irritable, and grumpy we become. Oh sure, we do it in the name of love. But we become more miserable in the process. Is that truly love, then?

Jesus tells the woman that he does not condemn her for her misplaced affections. He also does not condemn the teachers and Pharisees for their misplaced judgment. The accusers are asked to look inside their own hearts, and they identify where they, too, had missed the mark of following God with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength. They walk away, unable to throw the first stone at her.

Neither does Jesus condemn us; not one of us is without our demons of pride or greed or lust, and yet, Jesus does not condemn us. Instead, he gently says, "Go. Leave your life of sin." Leave behind the things that distract you from the goodness of God; leave behind the things that suck joy out of your life; leave behind that which causes division and anger among your family or friends.

This week, can you identify *one* thing that sucks the joy out of you during the Christmas season—and then *let it go*. Let go of the pressure to make the perfect Christmas dinner or have the perfect Christmas tree. Let go of the expectations that you need to buy everyone

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the perfect Christmas gift. Maybe you don't buy gifts at all; maybe you bake one fewer Christmas recipe. Maybe, you let go of that ideal family get together where everyone gets along perfectly.

And then, because saying no to something means that you can say yes to something else, what is one thing that you want to keep because it brings joy? Identify *one* thing that brings you joy this season—and then *do it*. Do it with all the joy and abandon you can muster. Do it with smiles and laughter. Do it with love and hope, for God delights in good things.

Advent is a month of preparation for Christmas. It sets our hearts and minds on the One who came to bring Light into the world. But if we're too distracted by the lights and the expectations, we'll never see him.

Let's be quicker to identify the areas in our lives that need to be surrendered to Jesus than we are to point fingers at others. Jesus does not condemn us for our failures to get it just right; neither should we condemn others for their choices. The invitation from Jesus, as it was to the woman brought before him, is to lay your own heart before God, your own habits, traditions, and desires, and let him breathe a quiet, peaceful joy into you this Christmas. The invitation, as it was to the teachers and Pharisees, is to drop your stones of judgment and return to God with your whole heart. To be still and see the joyful, good things around you.

Let's pray.

Lord God, we thank you for the joy that you give us as the Light of the world who does not condemn the world but saves the world through your love and mercy. May we look to you and give you the things that weight us down. May we see your joy this week. Amen.