

March 22, 2026

Paul Purdue preaching

Early in the morning Jesus returned to the Temple Mount. It is about a two mile walk from the Mount of Olives to the Temple, down a few hundred feet and then back up. Perhaps Jesus entered through the beautiful eastern or Golden Gate. I picture Jesus strolling through gardens or sitting up on an outer wall, his feet dangling over the edge watching as the clouds lit up on the mountains and the first light bathed the capital city in a golden glow. The 37 acres of terraced Temple Mount was beautiful, peaceful, serene. Perhaps, Jesus prayed Psalm 84 as the sun rose

How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts!

My soul longs, even faints, for the courtyards of the Lord;  
my heart sings for joy to the living God.

Even the sparrow finds their home  
and the swallow builds a nest,

there she raises her young near your altars!

Happy are those who dwell in your house, singing your praises every day.

Happy are those whose hearts beat as they move along the festival highways .

For one day in your courtyards is better than a thousand elsewhere.

I imagine Jesus sought the solitude of Temple at dawn, birdsongs and morning light, before the stream of vendors, money changers, pilgrims, and watchful soldiers filled the quiet courtyards with festival noise. Jesus often withdrew “Jesus often withdrew to the (secluded places) for prayer” Luke 5:16

Jospehus claimed that a million pilgrims came each year to Jerusalem. The crowds began arriving for the morning offering. John notes “All the people gathered around Jesus. And Jesus sat down and taught them. In antiquity, teachers sat down to teach. John doesn’t tell us what Jesus taught. John does not give us Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount or Luke’s Sermon on the Plain. John never repeats Jesus’ Greatest Commandment, nor Jesus’ call to “love our enemies” or “forgive 77 times”. John’s Jesus moves around long “I Am monologues” more than calls for ethical living.

As Jesus sat teaching the people, The legal experts and Pharisees brought a woman caught in the very act of adultery. Placing her in the center of the group, they said to Jesus, “Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of committing adultery. In the Law, Moses commanded us to stone women like this. What do you say?”

It is hard to overstate how offensive, gross, rude, sinful, evil, unjust, and oppressive this shaming is. Who would do this in church? What images of God fuel such dehumanizing violence? How have so many sanctuaries become places of judgement? How do we lose sight of the “very image of God” in neighbors, strangers, and even enemies? (Genesis 1) Why do we so easily say “them, they, those people” without really caring about “their” healing, wholeness, or restoration? I wonder if we have to stop judging to escape a judgmental outlook? (Matthew 6)

We should notice that “they” only drug the women into this church trauma. We never hear what happened to her partner. How was only one person caught in the very act of adultery? It is a safe bet that the answer is “patriarchy”. James Baldwin talked about America’s willful anemia to our nation’s history of racism and we might add sexism and classism to our forgetting. (The Wounds They are the Witness, Pierce) A willful amnesia to our own brokenness allows us to pick up stones, fashion crosses, and build more prisons.

Angry church folks too often use the Bible like a battle ax, not to heal and lift up, but to vanquish and harm. The angry mob demands, “in the Law, Moses commanded us to stone women like this. What do you say?” The Apostle Paul cautions us “Let no harmful words come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear.” (Ephesians 4) That is a deep challenge, for surely there is a time to raise our voice like a trumpet and to flip over tables, but perhaps when we speak or act without a deep longing for our enemies wholeness, restoration, and healing we just add to the cycle of recrimination and despair? Loving our enemies is not about loving what they do, but longing for them to live at peace with God and neighbor.

Jesus bent down and wrote on the ground with his finger. These church folks interrupted Jesus’ lesson plan. They objectified a child of God. They made a scene in church. They demanded an answer, Their actions are vile and shameful... Jesus does not respond. Why not deconstruct their flawed theology? Why not put them in their place? Why silently trace words on smoke dusted cobblestones?

It was a good thing Jesus took the time to dwell in solitude that morning. Jesus knew the power of silence. I wonder if Jesus was baffled by the hard heartedness of these church leaders? Did he need a prayerful minute to process their self-righteous inhumanity? Mother Teresa says that “without silence it is impossible to hear from God, because even God can not fill what is already full”. Perhaps, Jesus is calling us into silence, into time offline, into time apart from posting or reacting. Without silence it is

hard to remember who we are, where we are, or what we are about. Without solitude is it hard to know what to do in baffling times.

If they had entered the silence perhaps they might have remembered where they were? They were in church! Why did we go to the Temple, to church, to worship? Leviticus and Numbers describes how a priest ladled out 2 quarts of grain, poured fragrant oil over it, and then lit the offering with a censor of red hot coals. These offerings drifted up to the heavens and carried the fragrance through the Temple. (Leviticus 5-6 & Number 15) What was the altar all about, why were they there? "The priest shall make atonement on your behalf before the Lord, and you shall be forgiven for any of the things that one may do" (Lev 6) Could it be that we have to stop judging before we can really understand who God is: "Forgiveness ...For any of the things that one may do! It is difficult to live into our baptism vows to surround each other "with a community of love and forgiveness" if we are judging others. Hear this Good News: Forgiveness ...For any of the things that one may do! "Nothing can separate us from the Love of God given to us in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8) We think mercy or forgiveness is too hard, but without mercy and forgiveness our hearts harden and we twist God's image into an angry judge. Jesus tells us that the merciful, by practicing mercy, come to abide in mercy. (Matthew 5)

Yolanda Pierce warns us to examine ourselves, "As Christians... It is easier to imagine that we are the persecuted than the persecutors. It is easier to imagine that we are the injured party than the person holding the knife.. (The Wounds are the Witness: Yolanda Peirce) Jesus' silence offers time for us to think about our hearts, time to think about the Scripture we read or quoted.

I was drawn to Methodism because we use our minds, our experiences and our tradition to guide our theology. Jesus invites us to think about the laws. Is stoning reasonable? Was it a tradition? Does it square with the Steadfast Love of the Lord? Amy Jill Levine and Ben Witherington III tell us there is little evidence that the Jewish people executed anyone for adultery. (Luke a Commentary) Maybe if the ancient church mob had stopped testing Jesus, they might have thought about how well they upheld the rules around sabbath breaking, back talking with your mama, or not welcoming immigrants. Perhaps, if they had slowed down enough they might have even asked themselves, why do I want to persecute Jesus? (Perhaps Paul did this on the Damascus Road?)

Jesus bent down and wrote on the ground with his finger. They continued to question him, so he stood up and replied, "Whoever hasn't sinned should throw the first stone. " Bending down again," he wrote on the ground.

Gail R Oday in the "Women's Bible Commentary" notices that Jesus invited the church folks and Bible experts to reflect on their own sinful past. Why do I grip this rock so fiercely? Why am I so ready to post an insult or lob an accusation at another Child of God? Why do I speak of mercy and grace but at times judge others harshly? How might I feel if my worst moment was on display for the whole world? Oday notes how Jesus

never announces anyone sins: not the woman's or the angry accusers. Jesus just simply invites us all to ponder a future free from the sins, failings, missteps that trip us up and hold us back.

Those who heard him went away, one by one, beginning with the elders. Do we hope they went away deeply defeated, feeling terrible, and ashamed? Or do we care about their souls too? I want to hope they went away a lot less judgmental, certain, and callous and a lot more awake, transformed, forgiving, and merciful. When we stop rooting for someone's healing or wholeness, have we stopped rooting for love?

Finally, only Jesus and the woman were left in the middle of the crowd. Who has ever been healed by shame? Jesus stood up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Is there no one to condemn you?" She said, "No one, sir." Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you. Go, and from now on, don't sin anymore."

Gail Oday points out Jesus invites the woman to think about her future just as Jesus had invited the crowd to consider their past mis. Jesus does not name the woman or the crowd as sinners, but invites us all to strive for goodness, mercy, authenticity, peace-making, solidarity, justice, and love.

Oh that we might be restored by solitude, by prayerful self-awareness. Oh that we might remember that our churches are sanctuaries dedicated to forgiveness, restoration, and wholeness for all people. Oh that we might dwell with steadfast love of God and the sparrows songs long enough to "comprehend the breadth and length and height and depth and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge" (Ephesians 3) For perhaps if we understood God's steadfast, immovable, irrevocable love we might find it easier to breath in mercy, love, healing and Forgiveness- for any of the things that some one may do! (Leviticus 6) and that knowing our belovedness, we might break the cycle of recrimination, revenge, and rage, and speak love's truth into the world. Amen