

## **The Good News Is ... Rooted in Justice, Mercy, and Faithfulness**

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,  
on Sunday, March 22, 2026, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scriptures: [John 8:2-11](#) and [Matthew 23:23](#)

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If you gathered a stone prior to the worship service or as you came into the sanctuary, I invite you to take a moment to look at it. I don't know what that stone represents for you, and you might not yet either. That's okay. I simply invite you to hold that stone during the sermon. You might choose to continue holding it during the rest of the service.

The first sermon I ever preached was on today's reading from John's gospel. I was a student intern at a church in Portland, Oregon. The fall elections were coming up and there was a question on the ballot about reinstating the death penalty in that state. Aside from his own execution, this passage is the closest the gospels come to directly opposing the death penalty, so it seemed an appropriate scripture for that sermon.

I think I've preached on it in the 40-plus years since, though I don't remember those sermons if I did. This passage doesn't come up in the lectionary, the three-year rotation of readings for Sunday worship services, which means there's a chance that I haven't preached on it for over 40 years.

I'm not sure why it is left out of the lectionary. Maybe the fact that it almost certainly wasn't part of the gospel as the author first wrote it. There are various textual clues that make most scholars agree that it is a story that was added sometime after the person we call "John" wrote the rest of the gospel. It's interesting that it, nonetheless, continues to be printed in Bibles. Occasionally it's included as a footnote, though most of the time it's included in the main body of the gospel, though with a footnote saying that it is not part of the original gospel. I know that the Jesus in this story sure sounds to me like the Jesus in the rest of the gospels, so I'm glad it hasn't been excised.

The story starts off with Jesus at the temple in Jerusalem. There's a big crowd that's come to hear from him, so Jesus starts teaching them. Then in come some religious leaders, dragging with them a woman. These men claim to have caught the woman "in the very act of committing adultery." They ask Jesus a question. They are trying to put him in a position where no matter what he says, someone will be angry about it. The Torah says that the punishment for adultery is death by stoning. Adultery under Roman law was not punishable by death. What do you say, Jesus?

This is like the question asked of Jesus in Matthew, Mark, and Luke about whether it is lawful to pay taxes to Rome – only with life and death consequences. If Jesus says, "Yep, the Torah's the Torah; put her to death," the Roman officials are going to get upset with him. If Jesus says, "No, don't kill her," people will say that he has betrayed his Jewishness.

This is *not* a story about how the laws that came through Moses are bad or have been superseded (they aren't and they haven't been). It is easy to misread much of John's

gospel in a way that supports antisemitism. Don't do that here. This is a story about some people with a modicum of power trying to get Jesus in trouble.

I love Jesus' response. Jesus squats down and writes (the Greek can also be translated "draws") in the dirt.

There are two commonly asked questions when people read this story. "What about the guy – where is he?" and "What did Jesus write?" They are the right questions to ask, and they are not answered in the text. I invite you to imagine with me.<sup>1</sup> I'll warn you ahead of time that this imagining moves toward being a plausible, upsetting conspiracy theory. Plausible because men in power sometimes do horrendous things. Upsetting because it is plausible.

A group of men who didn't like Jesus decided to put him in a situation where he will either have to side with the laws of Moses or with the laws of the Romans. These men decide to bring a woman who they have "caught in the act of adultery" before Jesus and make him choose sides. But how will they catch a woman "in the act of adultery"? (This is where this imagining becomes a little conspiracy theory.) They decide to have one of them force himself on some woman at a particular time and place, so they can bust in and catch her. That's the reason the man isn't brought before Jesus: he was one of the conspirators.

In this imagining, this woman ends up subjected to the violence of the men who drag her before Jesus. And this happens after she was subjected to the violence of rape.

I have a clergy friend who thinks it's more likely that the man was simply someone powerful, that it was an open secret that he was having this affair, and so it was easy to follow him to his love nest. In this scenario, the woman might have been a willing participant in the affair. And when the affair was discovered, no one had the guts to grab the powerful man when they grabbed the woman. We know this story all too well, where powerful men aren't held to account for their misdeeds while the people without power get ground up in the system.

This still doesn't answer the question about what Jesus wrote in the dirt. If it were to happen today, I think that all he'd have to write is, "Epstein." I'm not sure what the equivalent would have been in Jesus' day. Maybe he wrote the same question we've been asking. Maybe he wrote, "Where's the man?" and the elders knew that Jesus knew the injustice of it all, and so they left and others followed.

The heart of the story, for me at least, is in what happens after the crowd has left. "And Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. Jesus straightened up and said to her, '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 from now on do not sin again.'"<sup>2</sup>

I have no problem with Jesus offering this woman mercy. It doesn't seem to me to be a cheap grace. There's been plenty of accountability, and justice that is not tempered with

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<sup>1</sup> This initial imagining is based on something shared by a colleague in a sermon prep group that she had read somewhere, so it is not completely original to me.

<sup>2</sup> John 8:9b-11, *NRSVue*.

mercy is not real justice. Justice that is not tempered by mercy is often simply cruelty. Justice and mercy need to dance together.

The injustice in our scripture reading is found in the hegemony of patriarchy. The power of men over women, the victimization of women, is so clear in this story, just as it is clear in the news that broke this week of the sexual abuses of girls and women perpetrated by Cesar Chavez over the years. What kept the women he sexually assaulted silent all the decades? The hegemony of patriarchy.

Dolores Huerta said, “I carried this secret for as long as I did because building the movement and securing farmworker rights was my life’s work. The formation of a union was the only vehicle to accomplish and secure those rights and I wasn’t going to let Cesar or anyone else get in the way.”<sup>3</sup> Yes, speaking up about Chavez’s violence would have hurt the movement. It would have deprived the movement of his leadership. And worse than that, I think it also would have deprived the movement of Huerta’s leadership – because the women are almost always blamed, at least in part, for the violence they experience. That, also, is the hegemony of patriarchy.

I’ve been thinking about what justice and mercy dancing together look like in this moment. So far, I’ve identified two things.

First, “in this continuing moment of pain and reckoning it is important to lead with truth, honesty, and compassion, even through the pain. No people, no movement, and no nation are honored in complicity and denial. The truth only makes us stronger, and illustrates beyond any doubt the difference between integrity and complicity.”<sup>4</sup>

Second, we need to dismantle the system rooted in and supportive of the hegemony of patriarchy. The Rev. Dr. Susan Thistlethwaite offers some suggestions of how we do that:

“First, believe women and girls, boys and men who say they have been abused and help them with not only counseling but also access to lawyers. This is essential.

“In addition, stop making heroes of leaders in movements. Chavez became untouchable because he managed to create a cult around himself. Contemporary social justice movements are, in that sense, ‘leaderless.’ No one figure has run #BlackLivesMatter, the #Women’sMarch, #Pride and certainly not the resistance to ICE in Minneapolis and beyond.”<sup>5</sup>

Dr. Thistlethwaite goes on to suggest that we rename the schools and streets and buildings named for Chavez, not after Huerta, but after the movement, to call them “Farm

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<sup>3</sup> Part of a public statement by Dolores Huerta, made 18 March 2026 and shared that day on the Dolores Huerta Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/share/p/18b1JSx1ti/>.

<sup>4</sup> Lewis Day, in a Facebook post, <https://www.facebook.com/lewbob/posts/pfbid02EFUzCa7ZKKx4X5giWaseSgIkFaWve3p1DVFFWW7CqbCQDsvmmycBHezSoGDb9VVSj> (posted and accessed 18 March 2026).

<sup>5</sup> From Susan Thistlethwaite, “Cesar Chavez: Sex Offender,” *No Fear Religion and Politics*, <https://susanthistlethwaite.substack.com/p/cesar-chavez-sex-offender> (posted and accessed 19 March 2026).

Worker Street” or “Farm Worker Plaza,” since “whole movements are the way justice happens.”<sup>6</sup>

“Patriarchy is so deep and so wide,” she says, “that as we dismantle one piece, others are crafted to take its place. But we can make this society, this world, safer for women and girls, boys and men, to make choices about their own bodies and have that respected if we believe them and act on that belief.”<sup>7</sup>

Look again at your stone. Perhaps the stone represents the anger you are holding because there is so much injustice to overcome. Perhaps the stone represents the anger you are holding because of an injustice you experience that continues. Perhaps the stone represent resentments you carry – and we can carry resentments for all kinds of reasons. Perhaps the stone represents a mercy you are not ready or willing to receive – maybe even a mercy you could give yourself. Perhaps the stone represents things or ideas you are holding onto that get in the way of your faithfulness to Jesus. Perhaps the stone represents burdens or judgments or pains you carry. Maybe what it represents is something you still need to hold on to. Maybe what it represents is something you would benefit from putting down.

You see, it’s a dance. Justice and mercy need to dance together in faithfulness, for that is where the good news is rooted.

Amen.

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*