

## Justice and Peace

### Jesus the Wisdom Teacher on Violence Against Women...by Anne Keller

The story of the woman caught in adultery (John 8:2-11) speaks silent volumes about the thinking of Jesus on the subject of violence against women. The usual interpretation of this Gospel story focuses on Jesus' admonition to the Pharisees to refrain from judging a sinner unless they themselves were free from sin, which of course, they were not. In fact, the phrase, "Let one cast the first stone" is used even today as an admonition to refrain from judging. But there is more to the story.

Jesus had just saved this woman's life, even though Torah provided for a death sentence for a woman caught in adultery. He did not condemn her, but rather told her to go and don't do it again. This is truly radical, for adultery was a *graviora delicta* (more serious crime) of 1st century Judaism, even more serious than murder. To understand why this was so, it is necessary to know how adultery was viewed in Jewish society.

In the world of 1st century Palestine, a man's wealth was not measured by the amount of gold or jewels he owned, or by the lavishness of his house, or by the size of his flocks or his fields. A man's wealth was measured by the number of sons he had.

The average life span was about 40 years. Given the prevalence of disease, children often did not live to adulthood, so it was important to have many, especially sons as they were the only ones who could inherit. Those who lived into adulthood were expected to provide care for their aging parents.

When the father died, all the material wealth went to the oldest surviving son. This usually included land, which was of prime importance to the family. To ensure that the land remained in the father's family, it was important that the bloodline not be adulterated by another man. But as is usual in patriarchal cultures, it was the woman's responsibility to ensure that she did not cause her husband's bloodline to be adulterated. If she were unfaithful to her husband, she faced execution by stoning.

Jesus of course knew the Law. He knew this woman faced an excruciating death because she was caught in the act. Although Jesus knew she was guilty, he did not condemn her. And he called the bluff of the Pharisees who had been so eager to do just that. Instead he showed love and compassion. Stoning is not acceptable in most countries today. But another kind of violence against women, intimate partner violence, is epidemic in contemporary Western society. In today's world a woman does not have to commit adultery to be beaten. In fact, a woman doesn't have to do anything to be a victim of domestic violence. One of the inherent problems in patriarchal cultures is that many men see it as a God-given right to have control over their wives.

The Church has reinforced that over centuries of teaching atonement theology. After all, one of the most infamously misused verses of Scripture, Ephesians 5:21, says that wives must submit to their husbands. The part about mutuality in love – verses 22-25 – is seldom quoted or preached.

The women who endure abuse from men who are supposed to love them are today's unseen, unsung heroines, as are the victims of trafficking, sexual assault, slavery, and poverty. The clients that I counsel are some of the bravest women I have ever known. Jesus, the compassion of Sofia made human, suffers with these brave women as they struggle to survive the violence perpetrated upon them by men. Jesus, the Wisdom of God, would take them in, tend to their bruises, help them to get away from the violence to safety, and empower them to move ahead in their lives. But, most importantly, Jesus would not judge them or blame them. Jesus would love and accept them as they are while helping them to become stronger.

I walk that same path that Jesus showed us, the path of compassion, love, acceptance and empowerment, as do many counselors who work in the domestic violence field. I help my clients secure protection from abuse orders, safe housing if they need to relocate, financial help for food and shelter, job training, child custody issues and a host of other social services meant to empower them to take back their lives from their abusers. But the most important thing that I do for my clients is to listen to them without judging, without blaming, and with empathy and compassion. And I believe in them.

That last statement is so important. The look of relief on the face of an abuse survivor when she realizes that I believe her story is indescribable. Before she comes to see me, she has been marginalized in every way imaginable. To find someone who believes her and accepts her without judgment is the first step in her recovery.

*O, Sofia, Wisdom of God, we thank you that you came to us in the person of our Brother, Jesus. He showed us your compassion, your understanding and your love for us. He taught us there is a way to live without resorting to the violence that destroys our humanity. We ask that you watch over your people, especially women and children who are so often the objects of male violence. Grant us the grace to refrain from judging others, and the courage to treat victims of violence with compassion, dignity and love.*