

ALL THINGS NEW

FIRST EPISCOPAL DISTRICT BIBLE STUDY

JULY 2017

July Theme: A New Spirit

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A New Word

God is calling us to get rid of old rigid ways of thinking and behaving – hearts of stone – and make room for a new spirit – a heart of flesh – that is flexible and responds to the needs of real people.

A New Understanding

The gospel of John was written between 80 and 110 AD. Church tradition holds that the writer was John, son of Zebedee, one of the twelve disciples, the one whom Jesus loved. The gospel's central theme is summed up in verse 14 of its opening chapter, "The Word became flesh and lived among us." John's gospel presents Jesus as both human and divine, paying special attention to the way God shows up "in the flesh" and tends to the needs and concerns of humanity. John shows the struggle of all who encounter Jesus — the disciples, the crowds, and the religious authorities alike — to understand that Jesus' teaching, ministry, and activity are the work of God.

Our study passage on the woman caught in adultery is a text that not only illustrates the new thing God was doing through Jesus Christ in this woman's life and in the life of the onlookers; but, the text itself is a unique reflection of a new thing God was doing in the life of the early church and those responsible for writing,

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KEY VERSE

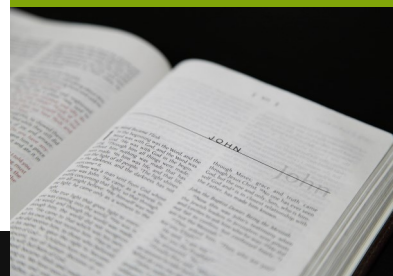
I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.

- Ezekiel 36:26

STUDY

PASSAGE

John 7:53 - 8:11



A New Understanding (continued)

compiling, and disseminating the story of Jesus Christ. The earliest Greek manuscripts of the New Testament do not include this passage and make no mention of the story at all. In later manuscripts, this story is found in different chapters of the Gospel of John; and some manuscripts even place it in the Gospel of Luke.

In our current bibles, we find the story sandwiched in between a long discourse in which an astonished crowd listens to Jesus teaching about himself as the divine light of the world and living water on the one hand, and attempts by the chief priests and Pharisees to have him arrested on the other. In fact, the passage seems a bit out of place. If you were to remove John 7:53—8:11 and continue reading from 7:52 to 8:12, the narrative flows seamlessly. Thus, the inclusion of this text in later manuscripts communicated to the communities reading this gospel that the story of the woman caught in adultery was so important to understanding who Jesus was that even though it was not included initially, the gospels of Jesus Christ would not be complete without its presence. God did a new thing by inspiring the early church to include this powerful story in the final versions of the New Testament.

John 7:53 - 8:11

⁵³ Then they all went home, **8** ¹ but Jesus went to the Mount of Olives.

² At dawn he appeared again in the temple courts, where all the people gathered around him, and he sat down to teach them. ³ The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group ⁴ and said to Jesus, “Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. ⁵ In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?” ⁶ They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him.

But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger.⁷ When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, “Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” ⁸ Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground.

⁹ At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there.¹⁰ Jesus straightened up and asked her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?”

¹¹ “No one, sir,” she said.

“Then neither do I condemn you,” Jesus declared. “Go now and leave your life of sin.”

The Old in the Text

1) Stone is hard, rigid, inflexible. Stones can also be deadly when used as weapons. Which characters show symptoms of having hearts of stone? What makes their hearts so hard?

2) Identify specific old, rigid ways of thinking and behaving that are on display in this story.

The New in the Text

3) How did Jesus model a new Spirit? Identify specific ways of thinking and behaving that would have been considered new to the other characters in the story?

4) Flesh is alive, flexible, responsive. How did Jesus, the Word made flesh, connect with the flesh and blood, real life of the woman?

5) How did the other characters in the story respond to Jesus' new Spirit, his heart of flesh? To what extent did the other characters accept the new spirit, the heart of flesh that God was offering them through the example of Jesus? In what ways did they reject it?

6) What new message might the inclusion of this story have had to offer to late 1st Century Christians who read this passage for the first time?



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A New Look*

Mason is a young man who grew up in church, but ultimately left after experiencing a lot of judgment by other church members..

“I’ve felt judged at all of the churches I’ve been to. I got in trouble at one church because I was wearing a hat. Sometimes [it was] the way I dressed or talked or when I painted my toenails in college. And also especially with regard to my gay and lesbian friends, my beliefs about homosexuality were not welcome. I have experienced that at Catholic and nondenominational churches as well as the mainline. I’ve learned now to keep my mouth shut around religious people. They’re not really interested in what I think or have to say.”

* Excerpt from Josh Packard and Ashleigh Hope, *Church Refugees: Sociologists Reveal Why People are Done with Church but Not Their Faith* (Loveland, CO: Group Publishing, 2015), 41-42.

A New Conversation

1. Sometimes hearts of stone lead people to *throw* stones that batter and bruise, and cause people to leave the church. What characteristics of hearts of stone, “old,” rigid ways of thinking and behaving did Mason experience growing up in the church?
2. Are there similar or different ways in which you see rigid thinking and behaving operating in your church, family, or community?
3. What are the characteristics of the new spirit, the “heart of flesh,” that God wants to put inside of us, as 21st Century AME Christians?
4. How could Mason’s church family have responded differently to him, with a new spirit, a “heart of flesh,” instead of acting out of old “hearts of stone”?
5. Where do you see evidence of God’s new spirit, people with hearts of flesh, active in your family, church or community?
6. What obstacles do you see in removing hearts of stone, letting go of rigid ways of thinking and behaving, and adopting more flexible ways of thinking, hearts of flesh that are responsive to people’s needs?

Take about 5 minutes to reflect on your personal life and answer the following questions privately. You may wish to jot down some notes in the space below.

A New Walk

1. In what areas of your life or faith walk do you see evidence of a heart of stone?
2. Can you recall interactions with people in which your own rigid way of thinking or behaving left someone feeling condemned, judged, and unworthy?
3. Are there areas in your life where God has offered you a new Spirit and called you to expand your ways of thinking and behaving, but you resisted?
4. What steps can you take today to embrace a new Spirit – a heart of flesh – that doesn’t let rigid ways of thinking and behaving get in the way of connecting with real people and sharing the love of Jesus Christ?