

LENT SUN 5-C

“The Woman Caught In Adultery”

(Isaiah 43:16-21; Psalm 126; Phil 3:8-14; John 8:1-11)

Have you heard of the nun who wanted to join a curling team? In discussing what position she should play, the skip said let her without sin cast the first stone, so they let her play lead.

Repent, believe in Jesus, and forgiveness will be your new way of life.

Fr. Bill Stang shares how in Kenya an unwritten tradition gave unwed mothers or pregnant girls the message that they were not welcome in church. They were blatantly being judged by the community, until a new pastor came along and pointed out that this tradition was aimed at the women, but what about the men? Then the tradition slowly started to change.

Jewish society at the time of Jesus was very similar. Tradition, male dominance, human pride and sinfulness, blinded the scribes and Pharisees to the injustice of their own actions in bending the law and using the woman as an object to trap Jesus.

The readings today address this injustice. The prophet Isaiah in the first reading foresees God working the impossible, a new thing, a highway in wilderness, a river in the desert. In the letter of Paul to the Philippians, Paul is caught up in the conviction that it is through the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus that God is working this new thing. All he wants in life is to share in that power, even if it involves personal suffering – such is his faith. And the psalm celebrates the newness of that kind of love and forgiveness with joy.

In the gospel, Jesus *is* this new way. The gesture of Jesus writing in the sand is a statement of dis-engagement, of refusal to buy into useless debate. Could he be writing their secret, sexual sins? Some think so but it does not really matter. Real sin for John is the refusal to accept Jesus as the Word made flesh. Jesus reveals their deeper sin of hypocrisy, self-righteousness, cruelty, false pride and dis-belief. He accepts both the woman and her accusers as sinners in need of forgiveness and healing and offers that to both. Ironically, it is only the woman who is open to the invitation to repent and receive the forgiveness of Jesus. Her accusers stay caught in their sin and leave exposed but “in order of importance”, un-repentant and unchanged.

Jesus reveals a God who is so much greater than we can imagine - whose mercy and compassion open up a way of new hope, whose love and forgiveness gives dignity and confidence back to the woman and to all sinners who are willing to acknowledge their sin and receive his love. By welcoming this God who is forgiveness into the depths of our hearts, we discover for ourselves a path of forgiveness for our future.

John Shea offers a fascinating interpretation of the gesture of Jesus writing in the sand. Who else in the scriptures writes with a finger in bible, not once, but twice, as did Jesus? The answer is God on Mt. Sinai, giving the Ten Commandments to Moses. We are assured of divine authorship because we are told the commandments were written by the hand of God. The difference between Moses and Jesus reveals the meaning of this story. When Moses descends the mountain with the commandments on tablets of stone, he finds that the people have already lost faith, turned to false gods, made themselves a golden calf, and gave themselves to debauchery. Moses gets angry, smashes the stones, grinds them down, makes a potion with the dust and punishes the people by forcing them to drink of it. Then with the help of the sons of Levi, he slaughters 3,000 of the revelers. The price of breaking the Law is death. Hence the scribes and Pharisees could say to Jesus: "Moses told us to stone such women."

As Hebrew tradition evolved, this breach of the covenant was seen as adultery. Yahweh and his people were married, covenanted, but Israel consistently whored after strange gods. For Jesus, this woman then is an image of Israel that has strayed from God and the true teachings of Moses - the very scribes and Pharisees now confronting Jesus.

After breaking the tablets, Moses returns up the mountain to plead for the people and suddenly he asks to see God's glory. God agrees on one condition that Moses will not see his face. The glory of God is too much for us to see face to face. Then God writes again a second time the words that were on the tablets that Moses (not God) broke. But before writing a second time, the glory of God passes before Moses and teaches him the true nature of God: the Lord is merciful, gracious, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, forgiving iniquity and sin.

The divine glory, too great to look on directly, is steadfast love and endless forgiveness. Yet this does not keep iniquity from being passed on from generation to generation. The way of life on earth is the forgiveness of God meeting the entrenched iniquity of people, the releasing God pleading with a holding, resistant people.

What Jesus has to say to those who confront him is that it is an incomplete understanding of the Mosaic Law to stone people who have broken covenantal laws. They had to learn the same lesson that Moses learnt. The God who wrote the Law is not punishing and vindictive. The true interpretation of the Mosaic Law is that God always writes twice. And between the first and second writing is the reason why two writings are always needed. There are no sinless ones. Israel herself is only alive because God has forgiven her many adulteries. No one can say cast the first stone for everyone lives by the grace of the forgiving God. Holding people in their sins while holding one's self innocent is delusional. The question is not the condemnation of adultery but the continuing blindness of people to the universal necessity of forgiveness.

So Jesus writes with his finger – the sign of God's authorship. He writes twice – the sign of God's forgiveness. He writes on the earth – the sign of a universal human condition. He refuses to stare at the people – the sign that sins are not held against them. In the end, there is only the woman, and no one to condemn her. The refusal of Jesus to condemn her

means there is no condemnation in God, only forgiveness, mercy, compassion and love. In short, there is no killing or violence in this God of Jesus Christ who writes in the dust. That is the message that the world still does not get, as it commits countless acts of violence in the name of religion.

This story is about neither the scribes and Pharisee's "sin" of self-righteousness nor the woman's sexual sin; rather, it is about the challenge to embedded religious authority that Jesus brings, and the possibilities of new life that arise from that challenge. Jesus places his authority to forgive and to offer freedom over against the religious establishment's determination of the categories of life and death.

We are challenged to look into our own lives and attitudes towards sin, our own and that of others. Jesus could see through the real motives and thoughts of others, and hold up a new future for all, both victim and abuser. Can we be like him and do the same?

Velma was abused by her future brother-in-law at the age of fourteen. She carried resentment towards him for fourteen years, until her own daughter was molested by his son. They moved to another community. Ten years after that, her granddaughter was abused by one of her son, the victim's uncle. Then Velma fell apart. The memory of what she went through, all her anger and resentment became too much for her to carry. She sought help from her pastor, who put her through a 12 Step healing process. She learned to express her hurt towards her abuser with love, following Matthew 18:15. She met with him in the presence of the pastor, read a letter to her abuser, and to the surprise of both men, asked him to forgive her for the way she had treated him for over twenty-five years. Then she got up and gave him a hug. She has since then shared a meal at table with him, and even danced with him. Her story at a 12 Step pilgrimage blew away her listeners. This truly is the new way that Jesus brought about, the new way he invites us all into.

The Eucharist that we celebrate today is our great prayer of forgiveness. We share in the Word and Body of he who wrote in the sand to reveal all sin as an invitation to repentance, change and new life.

So, this last Sunday of Lent - repent, believe in Jesus and forgiveness will be your new way of life.

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