

**5<sup>th</sup> SUNDAY OF LENT – C (March 21, 2010)**  
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No matter how many times we hear this familiar gospel, the drama is always compelling. The scribes and Pharisees try once again to trap Jesus (no matter that all previous attempts to do so had failed miserably). The woman they bring in is accused of adultery, a charge that seems based on fact. If Jesus says “yes, stone her”, then his reputation as preacher of the love and mercy of God falls apart. If Jesus says “let her go”, then they can accuse him of rejecting the law of Moses—a most serious charge indeed. Those authorities are desperate to get rid of Jesus because they see him as a major threat to their power and influence.

As he always does, Jesus avoids the trap set up for him: “if you stone her, let the one among you who is without sin cast that first stone.” An ingenious response—without denying for a moment the woman’s guilt, he turns the crowd’s judgmentalism back on itself. Realizing to their shame their own sinfulness, they each realize they cannot take part in stoning her. Then the drama comes to its climax: Jesus, the Son of God and true judge, is left alone with the woman. Who can imagine what was going through her mind? She knows her own guilt, the menacing crowd has left, but this mysterious man who just saved her life now turns his eyes toward her. Will he condemn her? No, he doesn’t. He lets her go her way, but not before warning her not to sin any more.

There is so much to this story, so much depth—saints and spiritual writers throughout the centuries have commented on this powerful meeting of justice and mercy, of sin and redemption. One thing that stands out in my mind about this episode is that it illustrates so well and at the same time both the challenge to conversion and the reality of divine mercy and forgiveness. Both of these—conversion and forgiveness—were always part of Jesus’ preaching and teaching, but he often would focus on one or the other. In this story, however, both are present...and that only adds to its drama and power.

On the one hand, Jesus has to deal with the scribes and Pharisees and how far too easy it was for them to judge and condemn those who did not measure up to their own standards of propriety. They were certainly critical of people’s failure to live by the law of God—and we need to remember that elsewhere in the gospels, Jesus affirmed their role as teachers of the law and in fact urged his disciples to do what they said. Where they stumbled, however, was in their own failure to heed the law—especially as it related to compassion and forgiveness. It was a whole lot easier for them to look down their noses on other sinners and judge and condemn them as worthless if not downright evil; easier than it was to look inside themselves and realize where they themselves fell short of living in loving obedience to the law of God.

And are we any better? If we were on the scene when the accused woman was dragged before Jesus, would we have been part of that crowd...perhaps with a stone in our own hand, ready to throw it at her? It’s way too easy for every single one of us to look at someone else who doesn’t fully measure up to God’s standards and think how bad they are and how God is certainly to punish them severely. But it is precisely then that we must remember what Jesus said about judging others and the state of their soul. That is not our responsibility; in fact, that is something we dare not do. Only God knows the state of any person’s soul; only he has the perfect wisdom and insight to exercise the judgment that is needed. We are responsible for our own souls and how we live our own lives and with the temptations and sins to which we freely consent—and frankly, that means that we each have enough to deal with on our own. We might want to be part of that self-righteous crowd who wanted to stone the woman, whoever she may be in our own lives today, but in fact every single one of us is that woman in one way or another. Maybe we aren’t guilty of the specific sin of adultery, but we each carry the baggage of our own sins that others might be all too willing to charge us with—and maybe even want to stone us for (at least figuratively). All in all, it is best to leave the judging to God...and pray that his mercy be shown to others just as we pray for it for ourselves.

So Jesus showed mercy to this woman—the power and reality of divine forgiveness, and he vividly demonstrated the moral emptiness of those judgmental scribes and Pharisees. But he did not for a moment minimize the seriousness of her sin—after freeing her from the crowd clamoring for her death, he challenged her: “Go, and from now on do not sin any more.” Jesus challenged her to repentance and conversion, and he does precisely the same with regard to us. He always spoke about the merciful love of our heavenly Father, but he also and always called and condemned sin for what it is: a rejection of God and of the way of life to which he calls us.

I can't help but wonder how our 21<sup>st</sup>-century American culture would respond if Jesus were here today, speaking to someone guilty of adultery or other serious offense, and urging them “do not sin any more”. Can't you almost here the cries of “don't be so harsh, so judgmental, so intolerant; you can't impose your morality like that!” We don't like to hear the word “sin”; it's too hard, it might hurt our self-esteem, and those in the cultural elite will make fun of us for being so old-fashioned. That seems to be especially true when it comes to questions of sexual morality. Dare to speak up at all for the teachings of Scripture and the Church about the beauty and goodness of human sexuality being properly and fully expressed only within marriage between one man and one woman, and be ready for the forces of political (and cultural) correctness to be released against you!

And yet...Jesus never backed away from or watered down in any way his challenge to us to turn away from sin. Yes, he spoke about forgiveness and demonstrated forgiveness over and over again—even praying for the Father's forgiveness of those who nailed him to the Cross as we will hear on Palm Sunday next Sunday. But the challenge to repent and to turn from sin was and is always there as well. Jesus did not condemn the adulterous woman, but he did not excuse her adultery and he most certainly did not say “go ahead and do whatever you want—if it feels good, do it!” That may be what Planned Parenthood and other forces in contemporary culture tell us, but in no way whatsoever is it the gospel of Jesus Christ. Sin in whatever form (sexual or otherwise) is real, it is ugly, it is dangerous, and it can lead us away from the love and the mercy that God is and desires to give us. And if sin is serious (‘mortal’, to use the traditional language) and not repented of, that separation from God can be eternal—and there is no greater tragedy than that. No wonder Jesus challenged the woman to ‘not sin any more’; no wonder he challenges us in just the same way!

As I said at the beginning, this story of the woman caught in adultery and how Jesus masterfully handled it is truly dramatic and compelling—all the more so because it really happened. And the woman's story is the story of each one of us as well. The mercy of God is available to us, and God wants nothing more than to embrace us forever in his merciful and loving arms. But that also and necessarily involves our heeding Jesus' challenge to “go and from now on do not sin any more”. We do not know how the woman responded to that challenge, and it would be interesting to know. What is much more relevant and important, however, is how each of us responds to that challenge. How, indeed??