

## 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent + 6 April 2025 + Isa 43:16-21 + Phil 3:8-14 + Jn 8:1-11

This week's Gospel, together with last weekend's Parable of the Prodigal Son and Father, are two of the most beautiful explanations of God's amazing mercy in all of the Scriptures. And how fitting they are to hear just before Holy Week. Hold onto that thought for a moment, as we dive deeper into today's text from John's Gospel. To begin, John reveals that the woman caught *in the very act of committing adultery* is not really the main concern of the scribes and the Pharisees. To them, she is just a "sinner," a pawn, actually, used to try to trip up Jesus. You see, the Pharisees wanted to get Jesus to speak against the Law of Moses. If He did, then they would finally have something to charge Him with and so be rid of Him.

But His reply is perfect: *Let the one among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.* In other words, He does not challenge the Law of Moses (although it should be noted here that the Law prescribed the stoning of *both* the guilty man *and* woman—the Pharisees ignore the guilty man in their trap). Now these days, stoning as a punishment for adultery may seem overly harsh. So how are we to make sense of Jesus' response?

Well, as always, we should consider the original context of the Law of Moses. At the time the Law was given, God's People had grown so depraved that they needed a heavy-handed approach. Now we are so accustomed to a world in which the Gospel is at work, that we can hardly imagine how awful life would be without it. And yet sadly, I think we are becoming more aware of the horrifying results of godlessness, as so many people profess no faith these days. In a world without awareness of right and wrong, punishments must be severe to maintain any kind of order. But God certainly did not delight in giving out punishments. As He says through the Prophet Ezekiel: *Do I take any pleasure in the death of the wicked? Rather, am I not pleased when they turn from their ways and live?* (18:23, NIV)

And so Jesus doesn't question the Law, but He does make it more 'complete,' as He prepares to fulfill it on the Cross. That is, He points out that the only person who can rightly execute true justice is *one without sin*. And the scribes and Pharisees are finally honest here, or at least they admit their defeat—they silently walk away, *beginning with the elders*. After they are gone, Jesus is left alone with the woman: the Savior and the sinner. And He does not pronounce her death sentence. Instead, He ends the whole matter with words deeply instructive for us, even today: *Neither do I condemn you. Go, and from now on, do not sin any more.* So what applications can we take away from this episode as a whole?

The 1<sup>st</sup> point here is found in the simple word that Jesus uses to address the woman caught in adultery. He doesn't call her *sinner*, nor *adulterer*. Rather, He simply calls her *woman*. He is addressing her as He sees her: a unique *person*, made in His image and likeness. We may see ourselves (or others may see us) according to our sins. But that's not how God looks upon us. Our sins may damage or skew that image, but they cannot completely snuff out the divine image. Because in Christ, no sinner is beyond hope of redemption.

To identify people in any other way always ends with disaster. If we dismiss the *person* by only seeing their sins, we deny them any chance to repent and change. This is the great tragedy of the Pharisees. She was only a 'sinner,' and object, rather than a unique person. But Jesus saw her in her totality. And He not only saves her physical life, but He gives her the hope of eternal life. Even more, Jesus helped the Pharisees recognize that they too were sinners in need of a Savior. While adultery is gravely immoral, it is not the only grave sin. As the Lord says in the Sermon the Mount (Lk 6), we must be careful to not see only the sins—the *slivers*—of others, and ignore the *plank in our own eyes*.

The other great danger in defining people outside of our divine source is very prevalent today, and that is this: when people forget God, they no longer have a transcendent reality by which to define themselves *as persons*. And so they grasp at anything to find identity, such as their attractions, achievements, wounds, political affiliations, ethnicity, college, sports team, you name it. But all of these "identities" are fleeting, and they only end up dividing. "Others" too easily become enemies, and this often ends in hatred and violence.

Next, we need to contemplate Jesus' words: *neither do I condemn you*. Think of how those words must have been received in the heart of that woman! She was obviously condemned by the scribes and Pharisees. Maybe she had even condemned herself. And then along comes this mysterious man who speaks to her, maybe for the first time, words of mercy! The Cross of Christ is proof that God doesn't hate sinners, nor does He want sinners to die in their sins. While the fundamental moral standards of the Law of Moses remain valid, the punishments of the Law ended with the Cross of Christ, and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, which enables us to truly be set free from slavery to sin.

Finally, Jesus tells the woman to *go, and not sin any more*. He reminds the woman that while He has given her this incredible second chance, if she truly wants to be free, she must change her ways. This is a very important part of the process of reconciliation, and should never be forgotten. In last Sunday's 2<sup>nd</sup> reading, St. Paul said that we in the Church are called to be *ambassadors for Christ*, imploring the world *be reconciled to God*. That's not an easy mission, especially these days. One of the hardest tasks that we face is how to live the correct balance of truth and charity, of justice and mercy. Some people say the Church is too judgmental: that we are too much like the scribes and Pharisees. Others think we have gotten too soft on sin: that we are afraid to tell people to *go and sin no more*. Sadly, the correct approach to this balance has even created divisions in the Church.

So the only way we can ever hope to live out this mission is by fixing our eyes firmly on Christ. Next weekend, our Gospel will be the passion narrative, where we will hear the cost of God's divine mercy: the suffering and death of Jesus Christ. Jesus never preached 'cheap grace.' He never went easy on sin. But He also never left anyone without hope, without the offer of mercy, without the chance to be known and loved. May we seek to do the same.