

Fifth Sunday of Lent: A Drama of Compassion

What a scene we have depicted in today's gospel. It is amazing how the Gospel writers, John particularly, but all the evangelists, are able to paint a complete scene in just a few words. There are the characters: the woman caught in adultery, the accusers, the scribes and pharisees, and Jesus, the Compassionate Savior. There is the motivation of the scene: the desire to make Jesus look bad, paint him as opposing the Law of Moses. There are the props: the stones and the finger writing in the dirt.

Usually we refer to today's Gospel as the Woman Caught in Adultery. We could also call it the Gospel of the Forgiving, Compassionate Lord. Or we could call it the story of People Who Hold Stones.

We really do not know who this woman was. Tradition holds that it was Mary Magdalene, who went on to become one of Jesus' closest followers. Mary Magdalene is often united with Martha's sister, Mary of Bethany. Perhaps that was her, or perhaps this was another person. Jesus was often accused of associating with tax collectors and prostitutes. The gospels were not concerned with individuals, they were concerned with presenting Jesus' message, the message of the Kingdom. I like to think it was Mary Magdalene, though. That is the tradition of the Church. When Mary Magdalene was first mentioned by name, she was called the woman from whom Jesus cast out seven devils, a woman who had thoroughly been in the grasp of the devil. All four Gospel present Mary Magdalene at the crucifixion and as the first one who experienced the Resurrection.

Of course it is possible that the woman of today's Gospel was someone else. The only thing that matters is that the woman who stood before Jesus was a sinner. Having been caught, she was both terrified and humiliated. She was terrified because the Scribes and the Pharisees had the law on their side saying she had to be killed. She was humiliated because her private sin or sins had now become public. Her accusers made her stand right there in the middle of the crowd. Embarrassed and disgraced, she might have thought that she would be better off dead.

That is what sin does to people who still have a conscience. That is what sin does to me, and to you. When we do something that is very wrong, we wish we were dead. Many people just give up. They say, "I've destroyed myself, why bother with changing? I'm going to hell, anyway." People who have ruined their marriages with affairs, their lives with substance abuse, or their world's with anger, will hear the voice saying that there is no use trying to change. That is the voice of despair. The devil uses this voice to achieve his goal: the destruction of God's people. The voice of despair is the voice that led Judas to hang himself. It is the voice that rejects the presence of the Compassionate Lord as healer and forgiver. It takes humility to recognize our human frailty and seek forgiveness and strength from God. Judas did not have this humility and gave in to the forces of despair. Peter was humble enough to seek forgiveness. How about the woman who stood before the Lord? Well, the

Gospel says that she remained with Him after the others left. She had the humility to seek forgiveness. And she received forgiveness. Mary Magdalene never left the Lord. She was present at his crucifixion, and she was the first one present at the Resurrection.

The scene could also be called the Forgiving Compassionate Lord. When she was dragged before Jesus, the woman may have thought that she was alone in a world that was humiliating her and that wanted her dead. But then she had an experience of God's love and compassion. She realized that she was not alone. Jesus wrote on the ground. What did He write? We do not know. Maybe He just scribbled a little to give the accusers time to think about their own sins. Or maybe he wrote something for the woman to read. I like to think that He wrote, "I love you."

The One who would be forsaken by all except that very small group who stood at the foot of the Cross would not abandon this woman. That is why she could not abandon him. She was transformed, transformed from a sinner into a virtuous woman, a follower of the Lord. Of all the people the Lord had contact with, thousands and thousands, He picked a repentant criminal dying on the cross next to him, the one we call Dismas, to be the first to join him in Heaven. And he picked Mary Magdalene, most likely the woman caught in adultery, to be the first to experience his resurrection. Jesus chose her not because she had been a sinner, but because she loved her just as he loves you and me.

Jesus will not abandon us. He loves us too much to leave us to our own devices. The Compassionate, Loving Lord is more concerned with each of us as individuals than with the results of our sins. We just have to recognize our sins and do our best to fight off sin in the future. That is all he wants for us to be cleansed, to be absolved.

The story of today's Gospel could also be called the Story of the People holding Stones. Those scribes and pharisees thought they had righteous anger. They were in full huff. They had the Law of Moses on their side. They had everything and everyone on their side justifying their actions. They had everything except love. They had everyone agreeing with them except the Lord. Like the Elder Brother of the Parable of the Prodigal Son, their anger resulted in their excluding themselves from the Banquet of the Father, or, in this case, the Presence of the Lord. They walked away rather than drop their stones and remain before Love Incarnate. It was not righteous anger that was motivating them. It was hatred, hatred for Jesus.

Like them, we have often let hate remove us from the presence of the Lord. We claim that we have reason to hate. We say we can justify our anger. We have been hurt. Someone whom we love very much, our spouse, our child, has been attacked. We **can** justify anger, but **we cannot** justify hatred. Unless we let go of those stones that we are holding, we cannot and will not stand before our Loving, Compassionate Lord. We have to let go and let God take control. The scribes and the pharisees refused to do this and walked away. How about us? Is our hatred more important than

our remaining in the presence of the Divine Lover? God help us! May God give us the courage to conquer hatred.

A woman caught in adultery. Scribes and pharisees wanting to use her to trap Jesus into rejecting compassion. The Lord Himself who would not be manipulated. What a drama!

There are tremendous reflections on everyday life contained in today's simple Gospel. Jesus is the One who will never abandon us. And His presence in our lives is infinitely more important than the stones of hatred we might be holding. In fact, the stones we hold actually hold us, hold us back from the Lord of Life.

At times, we are that woman, caught, maybe not in adultery, but caught in our sins. At times we feel overwhelmed by the weight of our own sins. At times we feel surrounded by people who know what we have done and are sickened by it. At times we are so upset with ourselves that we cannot look others in the face. We are forced to look down. As we look at the ground we need to realize that there is a hand there writing something in the dirt. It is the hand of Jesus, and He is writing, "I love you." Then we need to listen to His voice saying to us, "Go, and sin no more."

We pray today for the humility to seek and to accept forgiveness. We pray for the gift of living in the presence of the Compassionate Savior.