

Fifth Sunday of Lent: Blessed Are the Compassionate

The Gospel reading for this Sunday is often called the Woman Caught in Adultery. However, focusing in on the woman or on adultery misses the main point of the reading. The Lord is teaching us about the power of love and the consequence of hate.

The incident took place because Jesus' enemies were looking for a way to attack him. They set a trap using the woman. They were not concerned about her or even her sin. They were concerned about finding a way to destroy the Lord. They viewed his teaching negatively. He guided people to recognize that love had to be at the heart of all law. This was a challenge to their authority because it put people in the position of seeing through the actions of their leaders. The pharisees were not motivated by the love of God, or even, really, by their love of the law. They were motivated by their love for their positions of authority. They were motivated by their hatred for Jesus who challenged any authority that did not reflect the image of the Creator. They had stones in their hands. They really wanted to throw them at Jesus.

There was a Jewish law that said that a woman caught in adultery should be stoned to death. Joseph, the Lord's foster father, knew this. He originally had decided to send his pregnant betrothed, Mary, away, to protect her from the law. Joseph was a righteous man, one who would do what God wanted.

The Pharisees never even consider whether they were doing the will of God. They devised a devious plot. Since Palestine was under the domination of Rome, the Romans would not allow the Jews to kill anyone. Therefore, if Jesus said that the woman should be stoned, his accusers could denounce him to the Romans as challenging the authority of Rome. If Jesus said that the woman should not be stoned, then his accusers could say that he violated the Law of God and promoted immorality among the people.

Jesus knew what was really happening when the woman was dragged before him. The second chapter of the *Gospel of John* ends with the phrase: "Jesus did not need anyone to testify about human nature. He himself understood it well." He was aware of the sin the woman had committed. He was also aware of the sins of those who were accusing her. Here, as throughout scripture, his main concern was love, charity. There was a premeditated hatred in the actions of those who accused this woman. The focus of their hatred was Jesus. The woman was merely being used as an opportunity for the enemies of God to attack the Lord. I intentionally mean this phrase to sound diabolical. For anyone who focuses on hate is in league with the devil, the prince of darkness and the king of hatred.

It has become a trite truism of our time to say that our society is polarized. There are extremes on each side of the argument who speak words of hatred regarding the other side. The commentators on CNN and FOX do not just throw rocks at the other side, they hurl boulders. They prod their listeners to embrace a hatred

toward those with whom they disagree. Even within in the Roman Catholic Church in America there are extremes with rocks in their hands, ready to hurl them at others. There are those who call themselves “faithful Catholics” who are in fact throwing stones at the rest of us, and there are those among the rest of us who consider the others as a bunch of cooks who are disloyal to the pope. Each side is hurling stones of hatred. This cannot be our way of reacting to those with whom we disagree.

The Pharisees ready to stone the woman caught in adultery came to a realization of what they were doing. To their credit and with the Lord’s gentle encouragement, they realized their own sins and turned away from the scene they created. Notice that the first to leave were the elders. They were wise enough to know that they were wrong. Perhaps their first steps towards their own salvation began when they walked away from the woman and from their hatred.

We really do not know anything else about this woman. We only know for sure that Jesus told her to sin no more. Tradition says that the woman was Mary Magdalene. That was because the *Gospel of Luke* introduced Mary Magdalene as a sinner who had seven demons expelled. An additional tradition says that this was the same Mary who is called Mary of Bethany, the sister of Martha and Lazarus. That flows from a combination of the incident in the *Gospel of Luke* at the house of Simon the Pharisee when a woman known as a sinner anointed Jesus with expensive perfume and the incident in the *Gospel of John* when Mary of Bethany anointed Jesus with costly perfume. Perhaps the three, the woman caught in adultery, Mary of Bethany and Mary Magdalene were the same person. We do not know. One thing is for sure: all four gospels put Mary Magdalene at the tomb of the Lord as the first witness of the Resurrection. Was this the sinner caught in adultery who was the first to experience the resurrection of Jesus? Was her life so transformed by the Love of Jesus, that she became one of his closest disciples? It seems so very reasonable, for the power of love has the power to transform darkness into light, sinners into saints.

We all possess the power to transform others with our love or to devastate others with our hate. We all can throw stones, or we can pick up the sinners. Many homes have been destroyed by the refusal of spouses to forgive each other, or the refusal of parents and children to forgive. Many of us cling to hatred as though our suffering gives us the right to destroy the lives of others.

But there are others of us who have taken today’s gospel to heart and who are more concerned with love than with their own feelings. A long time ago, I knew a family in another parish that struggled due to the mother’s chemical dependency. The children had continual difficulty in school as they acted out their home frustrations in their classes. The husband attempted to be both breadwinner and home parent whenever his wife was having a bad spell. It was impossible for him to consider any promotion that could expect him to work more than the minimum his boss desired. He could have chosen to hate his wife for what she was doing to their family. But he refused to hate. He continued to love taking her to doctor after doctor, psychiatrists and psychologists, dependency meeting after meeting. Only after years of this, did the

incidents of his wife's bad spells become less and less. Only very slowly did the weeks between incidents become months, and then the months became years. His wife fully recovered. The children survived, and, yes, in many ways their childhood was terrible. But in another way, there was a certain beauty. They learned about the limitless power of love. And when they became adults, they realized how proud they were of their father.

Yes, the power that you and I have to hurt is hideous and diabolical. But the power we have to heal is infinite. We possess the power of Jesus Christ's love. We have this power, you and I. If we have the courage to take a step from our selfish grasping onto our hurts and a step into the Love of Jesus Christ, we can join him in transforming the world.

The life of the woman caught in adultery was radically changed by the man who was challenged to judge her. He was more concerned with her than he was with her sin. She found reason to respect herself for she learned from Jesus that she was lovable, and she was loved.

Jesus calls us to pick up our crosses and follow him. To pick up our crosses we have to drop our stones.

Blessed are the compassionate, for they will have compassion.