

John 8:1-11

Sunday, March 13th, 2016 Year C

There can be a tendency for those of us who have heard this story many times to only think about it as being a kind of test for Jesus to pass. It is not that Jesus' passing of this test is unimportant; it is just that in thinking this way, we may miss some of the key human aspects of the story. One of the things that struck me, as I was preparing for today, is the significant evil lying just below the surface. There is a real malevolent presence that drives this story forward. If we think about it, someone has come up with this plan, which involves catching a woman in the act of adultery, and using her to destroy Jesus. Think about the evil behind the planning of this trap. The planning of the killing of a woman in order to discredit a teacher. Think about the voyeurism, frankly the creepiness, of these men, who waited around to "catch" this woman, and yes, they only caught the woman, when obviously there was a man there as well. The Old Testament references are clear, both the man and the woman who commit adultery are to receive the same punishment. All this evil seems to be bearing down on Jesus, on what was once a quiet and peaceful morning in the Temple.

Jesus would have sensed the evil in His presence. He would have recognized it in the woman's fear, her anger, her shame, her confusion, and her realization of the desperation of her situation. Jesus would have sensed too, the evil that ignited this mob of men, to pick up their rocks, in their self-righteous anger, in order to do their duty, of purging this woman's evil from their midst. Bishop Robert Barron speaks about this idea of evil spreading like wildfire from one person to another, until it is unleashed on a single individual, a single scapegoat. This is the same evil often found in our school-yards, where one particular child, for whatever reason, is singled out for ridicule, torment, and humiliation by the rest of the kids. I think of it as being the

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same evil that we hear about in these “hazing” incidents, where those inducting the new-comers into the group, see them as being something less than human, and then proceed to treat them as such. It is very interesting also, that as Bishop Barron points out, this is the same evil present, when we gather in a group, to discuss the particular failings, of one who happens to be absent.

Jesus would have sensed the malignant presence that set this trap for him. A trap that appeared to leave him with only two choices: 1) To say, “Yes, you are correct, the law demands that this woman must die.” 2) “No, do not harm this woman – Moses was wrong.” The Scribes and Pharisees thought they had backed Jesus into a corner. If He says, “Yes, go ahead and stone her.” Jesus would have to answer to Rome for violating Roman law, that held only Romans could carry out capital punishment. If Jesus were to say, “No, she should not be killed.” He, in effect, would be saying the Law of Moses is wrong, discrediting Himself as a teacher of Israel.

Jesus’ response must have been un-nerving to the mob. Instead of becoming fearful or panicked at the onslaught of all this evil pointing directly at Him, He calmly bends down and begins to write on the ground with His finger. We really don’t know what He wrote, although there have been many commentators, who have speculated on some fascinating ideas, about what it may have been. What we do know, is that His response was brilliant. Instead of falling into the trap set for Him, He takes that trap and turns it around, when He says, “Let he who is without sin be the first to throw a stone.” If anyone of those men throws a stone, the responsibility for the woman’s death, and for defying Rome, would now lay squarely on their heads. If they don’t throw a stone, they are then admitting their own sinfulness, and they are now the ones violating the Law of Moses. It is the elders of the mob that first realize their dilemma, and they acknowledge their defeat by walking away, until none are left to accuse the woman. She is left to stand alone in front of Jesus.

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We have come to the heart of this Gospel story, the woman's encounter with the Lord. Jesus says, "Woman where are they? Has no one condemned you?" She replies, "No one, Sir?" Jesus says, "Then neither do I condemn you, Go, and from now on do not sin anymore." What Jesus does here, is call this woman to conversion. This, to me, is the key message for today. It is important to note what Jesus does and does not do here. Jesus does not condone the woman's sin. Jesus does not say her sin does not matter. Jesus does not say her adultery is ok. Jesus does not say that the Law of Moses was wrong to condemn adultery, a sin that goes to the heart of a marriage, which is the heart of the family, which is the heart of a nation. What Jesus does, is offer her a choice. A choice that says she can continue to live her life her way, which has led her to be within a breath of being stoned to death, or she can choose to accept the mercy Jesus offers, and begin a brand new life of holiness.

What Jesus is offering this woman is nothing less than redemption, nothing less than salvation. He is offering her a transformation of life. A transformation that will take her, from walking along a road that is leading her towards certain death, to a new path, a new journey, on the "Way" that leads to eternal life. Her choice is between life and death. He is offering her nothing less than resurrection. My brothers and sisters this is the same choice that Jesus offers to each and every one of us today. This is the reason that God became man. This is the reason that Jesus came into the world, to show us the merciful face of the Father. This is what Pope Francis calls "the beating heart of the Gospel". Jesus came not to condemn us in our sin, but to save us from it. He came to offer us a share in His divine life, a life of holiness, a life of abundance.

This woman's experience; although full of trauma, evil, and sin; is also an experience of great grace. This Gospel gives us a powerful example of Saint Paul's incredibly hopeful words, "Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more." The grace this woman receives comes in

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the form of a very clear choice, but for many of us that choice can be a little bit muddier. Most of us won't be dragged in front of a judge, by a mob, that wants to stone us to death, but all of us still have to face the choice that Jesus presents. Do I continue to live my life my way, or do I repent and seek to follow the Way of Christ?

One of the greatest dangers to our spiritual life, especially in these modern times, is a kind of spiritual complacency that says, "I don't need to think about these things, after all, I'm a pretty good person." We just had a wonderful talk about this subject, by our Adult Faith Formation Director, Calysta, a couple of weeks back in our Alpha course. The idea is we tend to see ourselves as "not too bad", at least not as bad as that person over there. We are about here, certainly not quite as high as saintly people like Mother Theresa and Pope John Paul II, but certainly not anywhere near as low as axe murderers, ISIS terrorists, or if you work at LANL, group leaders. In order to inject a little reality into this point of view, let's take a look at the criteria that will be used to judge us. Let's give ourselves a chance here, let's take a look at what Pope Francis has to say, someone who is all about God's Mercy. The following quote is taken from "Misericordiae Vultus", the document in which Pope Francis declared this year to be an Extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy. He says:

"We cannot escape the Lord's words to us, and they will serve as the criteria upon which we will be judged: whether we have fed the hungry and given drink to the thirsty, welcomed the stranger and clothed the naked, or spent time with the sick and those in prison (cf. Mt 25:31-45). Moreover, we will be asked if we have helped others to escape the doubt that causes them to fall into despair and which is often a source of loneliness; if we have helped to overcome the ignorance in which millions of people live, especially children deprived of the necessary means to free them from the bonds of poverty; if we have been close to the lonely and afflicted; if we have forgiven those who have offended us and have rejected all forms of anger and hate that lead to violence; if we have had the kind of

patience God shows, who is so patient with us; and if we have commended our brothers and sisters to the Lord in prayer. In each of these “little ones,” Christ himself is present. His flesh becomes visible in the flesh of the tortured, the crushed, the scourged, the malnourished, and the exiled... to be acknowledged, touched, and cared for by us. Let us not forget the words of Saint John of the Cross: “as we prepare to leave this life, we will be judged on the basis of love”. [12]

Now, if in the depths of your heart, you can honestly say, “Yes, I’m good, I’ve got this” then, praise God, you are not far from the Kingdom of Heaven. However, if you are like me, and these words “cut you to the heart”, then there is only one thing we can do, and that is to accept Jesus’ offer, and hand ourselves over to the mercy of God. The “Good News”, and it really is good news, is that Jesus is just waiting for the chance to pour out His mercy upon us. However, He will not force us. Love can never be forced. Just like the woman in today’s Gospel, we have to make a conscious decision to accept the mercy being offered to us. Our decision begins as a movement of our hearts towards Christ, and then, as baptized Catholics, we express our desire to follow Him, by going to Confession. It does not matter if it is for the first time or for the thousandth time, wherever we are on our spiritual journey, we are all being called to deeper conversion. In this great gift of the Sacrament of Reconciliation, each of us can experience that same personal encounter, the woman in today’s Gospel did, with the overwhelming mercy of God.

My brothers and sisters this is the Fifth Sunday of Lent. We are in the home stretch, heading towards Holy Week. I encourage and invite you to make these remaining days of Lent fruitful, by consciously deciding to follow Jesus Christ more closely, by allowing His mercy to fill your heart, by allowing His mercy to change your heart, so that you too, may experience that incredible new life in Christ.