

FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT

Our scripture passage comes from the Gospel of John 8:1–11. This is the scene in which Jesus is presented with a woman caught in adultery who is about to be stoned to death by the scribes and Pharisees. There are several interesting dynamics that occur in this passage and offer points for our reflection during this Lenten time when we, too, are called to forgive and be forgiven as part of our ongoing repentance.

The first point to note is the attitude of the Pharisees and scribes who are trying to entrap Jesus. They have cleverly devised a plan to put Jesus in a compromising position by which they think He will end up either condemning the woman to death or openly contradicting the Mosaic Law. Either of these two choices would cause our Lord to lose the support and admiration of many disciples.

In order to carry out this plan of entrapment, the Pharisees and scribes claim that a woman has been caught in the very “act” of adultery. This means that she was entrapped as well yet the man was apparently allowed to go free since he is not mentioned. Thus, a double standard is immediately revealed in their plan. The woman is objectivized and publicly humiliated as she is accused in front of the crowd and her life is laid bare for all to see. Throughout the conversation with Jesus, the Pharisees and Scribes treat the woman as nothing more than an instrument of their ultimate goal, which is to discredit the Lord. She is not a person to them but only an unfortunate bystander in their plot to seek Jesus’ demise. Her life hangs in the balance and those condemning her seem to be indifferent to her plight.

In the face of such callous malice, Jesus first responds by ignoring their challenge and writing on the ground. When they press the issue with Him a second time, our Lord responds by discrediting them when He says, “Let he who has no sin cast the first stone.” Suddenly they walk away as they realize the injustice of applying a standard to others that they are not able to apply to themselves. With their hypocrisy exposed, they no longer condemn the woman nor ask Jesus to do so. They simply walk away one by one as they realize their own guilt.

In this interaction, Jesus is challenging all of us to correct the injustices we practice in our relationships when we treat other people as mere objects, instruments of our own pursuits, or pawns in our daily games. Our callous indifference to other’s distress and our participation in their humiliation or objectification does not decrease their dignity or worth in the eyes of God but actually makes us become less-human. We become inhumane any time we act contrary to the charity and justice of God in whose image and likeness we are created.

Who tries to entrap religious leaders today so as to discredit their message?

How are people used as pawns today for the personal pursuits of others?

When do you see a double standard used in our society by which some are held accountable for their actions and others are not?

It is sometimes said that we are most critical of others about those things we most dislike in ourselves. What does this saying mean to you in light of this story?

How does this encounter with Jesus challenge you to reconsider the standard you are using for others?

When do you see people act in an inhumane way (acting contrary to the charity and justice of God in whose image and likeness they are created)?

The second point to note is the development of the relationship between Jesus and the woman. As was previously stated, she was just an instrument for the scribes and Pharisees. However, in the course of the dialogue Jesus eventually engages the woman in a personal conversation. He addresses her as “you” — a word that is used only in reference to familiar people and never for strangers.

By doing so, Jesus is establishing relationship with the woman by His conversation. He is also breaking many social barriers by talking with her in public, which was something forbidden in the cultural world of Jesus. In all of these actions, Jesus is caring for her as a person and showing great respect for her even in her sinfulness. She, in turn, accepts the relationship and calls Him “Lord”, an indication of her awareness that she stands before mercy incarnate. It is only when the relationship is established that Jesus sends her forth and encourages her to sin no more.

This is an important dynamic because Jesus first invites us into relationship with Him and then He calls us into discipleship. Sometimes we think that we have to get our act together before we can approach the Lord. The reality is that we can only have our act together once we have met the Lord. It also offers us guidance in how we are to accompany others and help them change their lives. As the saying goes, people will care about what we say when they first we care about them. Establishing relationship with others in an authentic encounter is the first step of evangelization. Within that trusting relationship, we can then credibly issue the invitation to discipleship.

How has the Lord challenged you to correct sinful practices in your life as a result of your developing relationship with Him?

How has your involvement in scripture study or other parish ministries challenged you to deeper discipleship?

When have you brought dignity to another person’s life by your decision to establish a relationship with them?

The third dynamic to note is the contrast between the woman and the scribes and Pharisees regarding their sin. She is someone who was bound to her sin in a very public way. She came to know all too painfully the consequences of her actions and she had no choice but to face them. What a humiliating moment. When the crowd left, she chose to stay with the Lord. She stood before Jesus as a sinner acknowledging her sin. In that moment, Jesus set her free and changed her life. That moment of forgiveness and freedom was only possible because she chose to remain before Jesus while being bound to her sin.

That's what it means to bind and loose people from their sins. We can't be forgiven for something that we don't acknowledge as our sin. In a real sense, the first step in forgiveness is to be bound in honesty and humility. The second step in forgiveness is to stand before Jesus asking to be set free. With that confidence and trust in the mercy of God, the Lord can set us free, invite us to change our lives and go forth. Ultimately, this experience of forgiveness is based on our firm belief that God's mercy is always greater than our sin. With that confidence, we can readily seek the loving mercy of Jesus.

The scribes and Pharisees had a very different experience. They, too, were bound to their sin as they examined their consciences and realized their own need for forgiveness. However, they walked away when they realized their sinfulness and chose to go home still bound to their sin rather than to approach Jesus seeking forgiveness and mercy. As a result, nothing changed in their lives and their sin was not forgiven. They did not experience the grace of life-giving relationship with the Lord and they were not given the freedom to move forward with their lives.

This passage speaks to us about the dynamic of the Sacrament of Reconciliation in which we freely acknowledge our sin and come to the Lord seeking a new beginning. In this sacrament of healing the Church reminds us that "Penance requires ... the sinner to endure all things willingly, be contrite of heart, confess with the lips, and practice complete humility and fruitful satisfaction" (v. CCC 1450). Penance is a loving confrontation in which the mercy of God awaits us as well.

What has been your experience of the Sacrament of Reconciliation?

How has it been life changing and freeing for you?

Whom do you more easily identify with —the woman who stands before Jesus in public shame or the Pharisees who keep their sin to themselves and walk away bearing their guilt?

Jesus gives the woman not only a second chance at physical life ("Has no one condemned you?") but He also gives her an invitation to eternal life by remaining free of sin and in relationship with Him ("Sin no more"). This final point is a significant aspect of this passage and worthy of more reflection because it speaks directly to us as disciples. In short, Jesus helps the woman move beyond a discipleship that is based on observing rules due to fear of punishment to a discipleship that is based on a loving relationship with God.

It would have been an act of mercy had Jesus simply let the woman go. That action would have meant giving her back her life. Her future avoidance of sin would have been motivated by her desire for physical survival lest she be stoned to death for some other offense. Such an act of mercy in itself would have been admirable, but Jesus goes much further than just giving her life back. He invites her to avoid sin not only for the sake of reducing her physical risk but also for the sake of an eternal relationship with Him. Jesus wants her motivation to act faithfully and virtuously to be governed more by love than by fear.

The same is true for us. Sometimes when we are held accountable for our sin we just pray to be delivered from the consequences but God wants more from us than our avoidance of

punishment. God wants us to enter into a deep and life-changing communion of love with Him and to let our decisions and actions be guided by that love. Such a life will not only lead us to avoid sin but will actually inspire us to please God by our pro-active witness of love and mercy for others. That is the kind of disciple Jesus wants us to be!

When do you feel like you are motivated in your Christian life primarily by fear of punishment?

When do you feel you are primarily motivated by love for God?

How can a faith community help people move beyond a discipleship based on fear of punishment to a discipleship based on love for God?

One final comment should be made regarding this Gospel passage in general. Early Christians considered the sin of adultery to be of such gravity that some questioned whether forgiveness was even possible for such an offense. Other similarly grave sins that were also discussed included murder and apostasy (denying a person's faith in Jesus Christ especially during the times of persecution). This Gospel passage is preserved in scripture to remind us that no sin is beyond God's power to forgive if we seek the Lord's forgiveness with faithful contrition.

At various times in history the question whether forgiveness is possible for particularly egregious sins has resurfaced. Factors such as politics, secular culture, media attention, or popular concerns can heighten our particular distain for one sin or another. One need only to study history to see how societal values have changed over the course of time. Such a change is not an indication that sins cease to exist but that our awareness of their gravity can differ depending upon time and place.

It is important to remember that Christian's always have hope in God's mercy. The early Church affirmed this confidence in God's forgiveness for the sins of adultery, murder and apostacy. We must continue to profess that same confidence today and to trust that God's mercy is always greater than our sin no matter what it may be.

All sin is wrongdoing but not all sins are of the same gravity (see 1 Jn 5:17). God desires to forgive even the worst sin for our salvation. It is important to remember that God hates sin precisely because sin destroys the human person whom God loves. That truth should always motivate us to seek out God's mercy when we have sinned.

What does our culture consider to be the most serious of sins?

How does the statement, "God hates sin precisely because sin destroys the human person whom God loves" motivate you to trust more in the Lord's forgiveness and mercy?

The following prayerful reflections can help you to entrust yourself to the mercy of God during these remaining days of Lent and to seek the Lord's forgiveness of your sins.

O Lord. I want to be completely transformed into Your mercy and to be Your living reflection. May the greatest of all divine attributes, that of Your unfathomable mercy, pass through my heart and soul to my neighbor. Help me, O Lord, that my eyes may be merciful, so that I may never suspect or judge from appearances, but look for what is beautiful in my neighbors' souls and come to their rescue. Help me, O Lord, that my ears may be merciful, so that I may give heed to my neighbors' needs and not be indifferent to their pains and moanings. Help me, O Lord, that my tongue may be merciful, so that I should never speak negatively of my neighbor, but have a word of comfort and forgiveness for all. Help me, O Lord, that my hands may be merciful and filled with good deeds, so that I may do only good to my neighbors and take upon myself the more difficult and toilsome tasks. Help me, O Lord, that my feet may be merciful, so that I may hurry to assist my neighbor, overcoming my own fatigue and weariness (...) Help me, O Lord, that my heart may be merciful so that I myself may feel all the sufferings of my neighbor. (...) May Your mercy, O Lord, rest upon me.¹

Although I have often abandoned you, O Lord, you have never abandoned me. Your hand of love is always outstretched towards me, even when I stubbornly look the other way. And your gentle voice constantly calls me, even when I obstinately refuse to listen. When the sins in my soul are increasing, I lose the taste for virtuous things. Yet even at such moments, Lord, I know I am failing you and failing myself. You alone can restore my taste for virtue. There are so many false friends willing to encourage sin. But your friendship alone can give the strength of mind to resist and defeat sin. What a good friend you are, Lord! You are so patient, willing to wait as long as necessary for me to turn to you. You rejoice at the times when I love you, but you do not hold against me the times when I ignore you. Your patience is beyond my understanding. Even when I pray, my mind fills with worldly concerns and vain daydreams. Yet you are happy if I give only a single second of honest prayer, turning that second into a seed of love. O Lord, I enjoy your friendship so much, why is it not possible for me to think of you constantly?²

The house of my soul is too small for you to enter: make it more spacious by your coming. It lies in ruins: rebuild it. Some things are to be found there which will offend your gaze; I confess this to be so and know it well. But who will clean my house? To whom but yourself can I cry, "Cleanse me of my hidden sins, O Lord, and for those incurred through others, pardon your servant"? I believe, and so I will speak. You know everything, Lord. Have I not laid my own transgressions bare before you to my own condemnation, my God, and have not you forgiven the wickedness of my heart? I do not argue my case against you, for you are truth itself; nor do I wish to deceive myself, lest my iniquity be caught in its own lies. No, I do not argue the case with you, because if you, Lord, keep score of our iniquities, then who, Lord, can bear it?³

¹ M. Kowalska, *Diary of Saint Maria Faustina Kowalska: Divine Mercy in My Soul*. (Stockbridge: Marian Press, 2005), pp. 163.

² Teresa of Avila. (St. Teresa of Avila develops the concept of God's Fidelity and Divine Friendship in Life 8, 5; 11, 12 and 22, 6-7)

³ Augustine of Hippo, The Confessions. Book I, Chapter 5.
