
5th Sunday of Lent Year C
Christ the Good Shepherd, ORCC
Fr. Harry Posner
April 7, 2019

On Ash Wednesday, as Fr. Mike and I marked your forehead with a cross of ashes, we said the words: “turn away from sin and embrace to the gospel.” Turning away from sin means different things to different people. Sin can have a powerful allure, and it slowly turns us away from God. Sometimes, like the woman in today’s gospel, we are caught in the trap of sin but find forgiveness in God’s liberating love. Other times, we are blinded to our sinfulness, like the Pharisees, and find it harder to turn away.

Nearly thirty-five years ago, I set off on a path to develop a closer relationship with God. I answered the call to priesthood and traveled many miles away from my family and friends, to enter the seminary with the Priests of the Sacred Heart. Within the first few months of arriving, we traveled to one of our parishes on the border between Texas and Mexico. Having lived a fairly sheltered life, I was struck by the poverty and the overt racism that existed in Brownsville, Texas.

As part of our visit, we traveled to Metamora, Mexico and as we worked our way back to Texas, I encountered a young boy wearing a raggedy coat that was a size too small, begging for money. As one of the priests noticed my slowing pace, he dismissed the boy’s plight and hurried me along. Despite the tug in my heart, I walked passed, giving that boy nothing more than a smile, which he returned, as if he knew the struggle that played out in my head.

That night, as I closed my eyes in the comfort of a warm bed, and drifted off to sleep, I saw that boy in my dream. That young boy came off the cross and said to me, “Harry, when I was hungry, did you give me to eat? When I was thirsty, did you give me to drink? Open your eyes and see how I suffer with my people.” Thirty-five years later I still feel remorse, I can still see the face of that boy and I am reminded, that it is not my place to judge. For thirty-five years I have prayed for that young man.

God’s love is for everyone. Everyone is in need of mercy, compassion, and love. If I had given that boy a few dollars, would it have changed his life? No; but my refusal to do so changed my life.

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While I didn't help that boy, he gave me a gift that I will never forget. That encounter changed my theology, my experience of God, much like that woman at well in today's reading.

Our gospel reading today is about more than just finding God's forgiveness and redemption; it's also about suspending judgment, about being people of compassion. It is about seeing the plight of other people and responding with love and compassion. Every woman in first century Palestine was the possession of a man, initially her father or older brother, and then her husband. Women and children, like slaves of the time, were property and held little value apart from the male head of the household. Jesus didn't buy that nonsense. He saw value and dignity in every person.

The woman who was brought before Jesus was nothing more than a pawn to be used in an attempt to trap Jesus. Her suffering, her humiliation, her dignity made no difference to the Pharisees, but it did to Jesus. Jesus refused to be drawn into their game. He simply knelt down in front of her and used his finger to write in the dirt before saying "Let the one among you without sin be the first to cast a stone at her," and then he continued to write in the dust. The gospel does not tell us what Jesus was writing, but perhaps he was writing the sins of the Pharisees. Without shaming them, Jesus made his point that we are all sinners, that none of us is better than the other.

After the Pharisees left, Jesus raised his head and addressed the woman as a person, as someone worthy of his attention and respect. Jesus did not see her as a pawn, instead, he saw her as a wounded person. He touched her heart by telling her that he did not condemn her, that he did not judge her. Jesus spoke to her with compassion, with mercy.

Her sin, in my estimation, was not the sexual encounter of adultery. Her sin was thinking that she was worthless, someone who could be used, who had no intrinsic value. Yes, Jesus was telling her not to commit adultery again, but he was also saying that she should see herself as God sees her, as he sees her – a person with dignity who deserved so much more in life.

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Jesus challenges us to open our minds and hearts so that we can see the injustices in our world today, not only towards women, but also towards immigrants, those in the trans community, the undocumented, the bullied, the oppressed, those fleeing violence and oppression, and all who live on the margins. Prejudice and discrimination are alive and well in our society and when we allow it to color our vision, to close our hands into a fist or in a sign of refusal, we turn away from God. Jesus calls us to become better, to reach higher. Love your enemy, love those who wrong you, love those with whom you disagree. Love the poor, love the suffering, love the rejected, love the weak and vulnerable, and most importantly, love yourself.

My friends, as we begin this last week of Lent, let us remember the words that were spoken on Ash Wednesday: “Turn away from sin and embrace the gospel.”