

## 5<sup>th</sup> SUNDAY OF LENT – C (April 3, 2022)

Other than the events of Holy Week, what we have just heard is one of the most dramatic of all the events we find in any of the gospels. This woman, whose name is unknown, was guilty; of that there is no doubt. She was caught in the very act of adultery. Of course, the man she was with was also guilty, but for whatever unfair or unjust reason he seems to have gotten away. Meanwhile, the scribes and Pharisees thought they finally had Jesus cornered. They were enraged and scandalized by Jesus' words and deeds that they thought were totally out of line with their understanding of the law. So they now parade this woman before Jesus in the midst of the crowd, they quote the law that says one caught in adultery is to be stoned to death, and then ask Jesus: “so what do you say?”

Here's the trap, or what they thought was the trap. If Jesus says “you're right—stone her”, there goes his teaching about the mercy and forgiveness of God and his credibility as a wise and compassionate teacher. On the other hand: if Jesus says “no, don't stone her”, then they can say that Jesus is no teacher or prophet of God since he ignores the law of Moses which was the rock-solid foundation of the Jewish faith and practice.

Thus the trap...but as was the case with every other attempt to trap Jesus, this one failed miserably. He simply knelt down, wrote on the ground with his finger (we have no idea what he wrote), and then stood up and invited the one without sin to throw the first stone. The woman's accusers, stunned that the tables have been turned on them so unexpectedly, can only walk away shamefacedly—dropping these stones harmlessly to the ground along the way. They were reminded of their own sinfulness, and dramatically so.

First of all, let's be clear about one thing: adultery is serious business; it is seriously wrong. The Catechism reminds us of the basics—it refers to marital infidelity (n. 2380). It happens when two people, at least one of whom is married to someone else, engage in marital relations with each other. It is an offense against the marriage bond and the solemn promises of mutual love and fidelity that a man and a woman make on their wedding day. It also “undermines the institution of marriage by breaking the contract on which it is based.” (n. 2381).

The sixth of God's Ten Commandments is unmistakably clear: “You shall not commit adultery”, and he left no loopholes, no wiggle room. It is also the basis for the Church's teachings on all other aspects of sexual morality. Jesus did not water down that commandment at all; in fact, he raised the bar even higher. In his Sermon on the Mount he cited that sixth commandment and then added: “But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Matt. 5:28). And if that wasn't challenging enough, he goes even further. After affirming the God-given origin of the marriage bond and its permanence, Jesus declared that whoever divorces his/her spouse and marries another commits adultery against that spouse (Mark 10:11-12).

I know these are very hard words to hear these days, but the Church does not have the option or authority to ignore or water down the words and teachings of her Founder and our Savior. This isn't the time to go into detail about these hard cases or the annulment process or the related issues of marriage outside the Church or having such marriages blessed in and by the Church. I would just say that if any of you or a loved one is involved or has questions about such matters,

please don't hesitate to connect with me—I would truly be more than happy to help in whatever way I possibly can.

This gospel is one of the most powerful examples of how Jesus is all about truth and all about love at one and the same time. Love and truth cannot contradict each other in the least since both find their ultimate origin in God. He is the very essence of love; as St. John tells us in his first letter, “God is love” (1 John 4:8). And since Jesus is God the Son, he is that divine love that gave himself entirely to us on that cross. Let's remember that genuine love is always about the gift of oneself to another for the sake of the other. In this gospel, he showed his merciful love and his great compassion for this woman by saving her from death by stoning. But Jesus is also truth; he explicitly described himself as such: “I am the way, the truth, and the life—no one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). In this case Jesus affirmed the truth and the reality of this woman's sin; he did not dismiss it as simply an ‘alternative lifestyle’ nor did he downplay its seriousness in any way at all. Instead, he loved her enough to challenge her: “from now on, do not sin anymore”; another translation says “from now on, avoid this sin”.

Because parents love their children, they warn them to avoid things or actions that are harmful, wrong, or unjust. Because Jesus loved that woman, he did the same by his call for her ongoing conversion...and he does the same for every one of us. May we always be grateful for the loving mercy of God who desires not the death of sinners but that we might all live (Ezek. 18:23). And may we strive to live by Jesus' teaching and that of the Church which he established to hand on his teaching. As he promised to those who do so: “...you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:32).