

Fifth Sunday of Lent – 2022 C

She is the focal point of a gathering crowd. She is dragged in, no doubt filled with fear, shame, anger, embarrassment. Imagine her fate in the age of FaceBook and Twitter. Jesus does not simply excuse her.

But He does defend her, and He ultimately saves her. He knows that her accusers do not really care about the Law. Instead, she is merely a pawn in their bigger game, an occasion to trap Jesus and rid themselves of the problem He had become. In Leviticus, Moses had ordered stoning for adulterers – ***and for blasphemers*** – because somehow sin must be stopped. To condemn her would make all Jesus' talk about love and forgiveness seem empty. And to excuse her, He would have to deny Mosaic Law, lose His following as a great rabbi, and perhaps be stoned as a blasphemer Himself.

But Jesus has another way to deal with human failure. Sin can be ended, not by killing the imperfect sinner, but by **healing** the imperfection **OF** the sinner. Holiness is restored, not by vengeance and punishment, but by MERCY. This divine mercy does not ignore the Commandments or excuse wrongdoing as though it doesn't matter. Even God cannot change the past. But God alone can create a new future as Jesus also defends us, even in our guilt, and ultimately saves us as well.

We naturally wonder just what Jesus was writing as He bent down to the ground. John perhaps intends us to think of the finger of God tracing the Ten Commandments. ***I like to think perhaps He was just doodling, indicating that all the complaints and pretended outrage of her accusers really did not interest Him.*** Either way, here IS God in Jesus, BENDING DOWN to earth as He had humbled Himself in taking on our humanity, as He will fall on the way to Calvary and lay down to be nailed to the cross. But NOW, as Isaiah says, God is doing something NEW. In the face of an unquestionable sin, **Jesus forgives**. THIS is the “something new” ... the ***revelation that God's perfect justice is forgiveness with a***

future. Because of the Cross, sin does not end in condemnation and death when brought to Him. Jesus does not ignore the Sin, but He does defend the Sinner, healing us so that we do not grow hardened and drift even further away. Sin is undone, not by punishment, but by divine mercy, a remedy more powerful than human fault. This mercy grants a new beginning: “Go,” Jesus says, “but from now on do not sin.””

The woman’s accusers do not learn this, because they do not stay standing before the Judge. ***Mercy is not on their minds, so they cannot imagine it would be on the mind of Jesus.*** Instead, they slink away, one by one. They believe they have escaped punishment, because they still think that SIN must end in DEATH. But in fact, they have simply walked away from SALVATION. Because they do not have this woman’s courage to face Jesus, they do not learn that His judgment will be mercy.

Even more is at stake than her rescue that day, because Jesus’ choice to FORGIVE already points to the Resurrection. If death WAS to be the final end, the complete termination of our personal history, then it really wouldn’t MATTER how we lived. Forgiveness would have NO REAL PURPOSE, because it would all be the same in the end, both saints and sinners gone and forgotten. But sin and mercy matter precisely because we WILL live forever.

Moses in his day could do no better than hand on the Law with its fear of punishment to try to stop sin. But Jesus can go further, because He is both Judge and Healer, choosing even death to assure us of the Father’s unfathomable mercy. This is precisely the gift, the encounter with the Savior Himself, that IS the Sacrament of Reconciliation, where courage to face the truth brings us face to face with the Judge, and we too find there forgiveness with a future ... not condemnation, but mercy.