

Lent 5

Do you remember the story about a group of friends, men, I think, who knew each other's stories and jokes so well that they decided to give them numbers. So someone could shout out, "Number 5," and all those who liked that particular joke or story could respond accordingly. We could do the same things with the Scriptures because we know them so well, especially the stories and parables. Last Tuesday at our Bible Study Group at Queen of Martyrs we were reading the parable of the Prodigal Son. We had just heard it two days before then when it was the Sunday Gospel. So instead of reading it again I asked someone in our group to tell it to us in his or her own words. A woman volunteered to do so and did a marvelous job. We could all do the same thing. And if we departed from the text, our audience would call us up short. For example, if we were to retell today's Gospel story and began by saying: "the disciples brought a woman to Jesus who had been caught stealing..." we would be stopped dead in our tracks. "No," someone would shout. "It wasn't the disciples but the scribes and Pharisees who brought the woman to Jesus, and she had not been caught stealing but committing adultery." And suppose we wanted to be funny and changed the last line of the story so that Jesus said: "Go, and sin some more." "No," someone would shout. "Jesus

said: “Go, and from now on do not sin any more.” Yes, we know the story so well that we can spot any deviation from the original text immediately.

If we had time now, we could ask someone to comment on the story. That would be an enriching experience because even though we are not professional scripture scholars, many of us would have some very interesting interpretations to offer. But time does not permit that. However, time not only permits but even demands that I attempt to do a little bit of that. So let me try.

First of all, notice the complete disregard of the scribes and Pharisees for this woman as a person, as a human being. They care nothing for her embarrassment. Indeed her sin is almost irrelevant to them. They are using her simply as bait to catch Jesus in a trap. They want him either to contradict the law by telling them not to kill her or to adhere to the law and be their accomplice in her death. If he does the first, they will label him a sinner, a violator of the Law of Moses. If he does the second, his reputation as the compassionate healer will be wiped away.

Jesus walks through their trap, and he does so in such a masterful way that it is worthy of the wisdom of Solomon. At first he says

nothing at all. Instead he bends down and begins to write on the ground. But when they persist in their questioning, he stands up and says: “Let the one among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” They melt away. How are we to interpret that? Did they not throw the first stone because they recognized their own sinfulness? If so, they are not as bad as they seemed to be when they brought this woman to Jesus.

When they have all left, Jesus stands up and asks the woman if anyone has condemned her. And when she says no, he tells her that he too does not condemn her. And yet he adds: “. . . do not sin any more.”

We are approaching Easter, and it seems as though the Church is pulling out her heavy artillery of compassion and mercy for the Sunday Gospels. Last week we watched a soft-hearted father embrace his son who had squandered his inheritance and plead with his older son to accept his brother back. This is what God is like, Jesus taught us in this parable. Today we see Jesus again preaching forgiveness and compassion. “I do not condemn you,” he tells this woman.

Why is it, how is it, that religion can be the source of division and hatred? Yet, in the history of the world that has often been the case. We see it even in our own Christian history. Christians have slaughtered other Christians in the name of God and Jesus. Did these Christians not read the parable of the Prodigal Father? Did they not read this story of the woman taken in adultery?

Our Christian faith should be Gospel, Good News, for us and the world, for it preaches a God of compassion and forgiveness. Jesus asks us to be like the Father of those two sons. Jesus asks us to be like himself in this story, not to judge others harshly, not to throw stones at others, for we are all sinners together. He also tells us that if we are generous in judging others, others will be generous in judging us.

Let us remake our lives in the image of these Gospel passages. If we do so, we will be happy, and the world will profit from our lived faith.