

Sunday of the Fifth Week of Lent

Year C

Isa 43: 16-21

Psalm 126: 1-6

Rom Phil 3: 8-14

John 8: 1-11

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How many times do we imagine this scene had occurred in the time of Jesus? If it was the law, and if we know human nature, chances are that many times a woman was stoned to death by a morally outraged crowd. But probably never once would the man who had been caught with her suffer the same consequences.

The scribes and pharisees bring a woman to Jesus in order to use her to trap him. So this particular woman, who had been exploited by a man for sexual gratification, was to be exploited again by the authorities as a weapon against Jesus. In neither case would there be any concern for her welfare, for her redemption, for anything pertaining to her dignity as a human person. Jesus bent over and wrote in the dust when they brought her to him, then raised his head to say, "Let the one among you without sin be the first to cast a stone at her," and resumed his writing in the dust. Then he addressed her as a person, as someone worthy of his attention, and told her in so many words not to disgrace herself by committing this sin again, that she was better than that. Her sin, in my estimation, was not the sexual encounter called adultery. Her sin, I believe, 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 ought to act differently.

Isaiah tells us in the first reading that God makes all things new. We should let go of the past and allow God to lead us in new ways. How difficult it is to change, to adjust, to go in new ways. We want to keep things as they are because that's the most comfortable way for us. The bane of every pastor's existence, when trying to innovate, is to hear people say, "We've always done it that way," when they want to keep things as they are and resist change. Jesus challenges us today to see things anew, to open our minds and hearts to the new way of thinking that he brought to light, as he had in so many other ways during his public ministry. This encounter is yet another example of the ways that he bucked the system, the closed-mindedness of the scribes and pharisees, who so often condemned him for doing things differently.

One important reason that Jesus brought to light is that we are not perfect, and therefore in need of learning, growing, changing. If we were perfect, we would never need to change. The prime sin of humankind was the sin of pride in the Garden of Eden, that humans wanted to be God. Worse than just wanting to be, they thought they could be. We are constantly struggling with that sin of pride, that temptation to think we know everything and we don't need to change. Like the scribes and pharisees we are prone to want to keep things as they are and not go through the uncomfortableness of growing, of changing, of being led in new ways to become better people.

Jesus was confronted with a scene that the people of his day took for granted; they were ready to stone a woman to death. He made them think, forced them to confront the reality of the situation that none of them was in a position to condemn this woman if they were truthful with

themselves. He further opened their eyes to the plight of the woman who was exploited. Recently I had the opportunity to meet an Augustinian brother from Nigeria, Fr. Patrick, who told me about the situation of widows in Nigeria. First of all, girls are not educated or given any special training; they are not valued for anything other than producing children and taking care of the house. When a woman is widowed, she often has several children and may be only around 30. Her husband's family will come to reclaim "his" possessions, leaving her destitute. She has to marry one of his brothers, or fend for herself. With no training, no education, she often has to resort to the world's oldest profession. Just like the woman in today's Gospel, she is exploited by her society, and if she were caught or had a child out of wedlock, she could easily be executed for her "sin". We have to stand up for those who are still exploited in our world; we Christians should be doing as Jesus did, making people uncomfortable as we confront them with the gross injustice of situations like this.

Jesus made people uncomfortable, challenging them to let go of the past which they hold on to for the sake of convenience, so that they can grow and, as St. Paul said in the second reading, move towards that upward calling in Christ. We are not perfect; we are all sinners, in need of help. We will become better people as we become more like Christ. He challenges us to open our minds and hearts so that we can see the injustices in our world today, not only towards women, but towards immigrants, people suspected of terrorism only because of their ethnic origin, those who are poor and uneducated – we know the many ways that prejudice exists. Christians don't do that; Christians act as Jesus did towards all people because he saw them as children of God, equally valuable and lovable by his Almighty Father. This season of Lent is a time for us to stretch, to grow, to open our minds and hearts to the ways that Jesus teaches us.