

Fifth Sunday of Lent
Pastoral Reflection
April 3, 2022

In today's gospel, the scribes and Pharisees use a woman caught in adultery as a prop in their scheme to undermine Jesus. The whole scene is a set-up meant to take down Jesus. The "question" posed to Jesus is meant to put him in a no-win situation. If Jesus were to agree to the stoning of the woman, he would in fact be going against Roman law which forbid Jews from carrying out the death penalty, a sentence handed down only by the Roman authorities. If he answers no, he is tacitly recognizing the priority of Roman authority over Moses' authority. Either way, he loses face and can be cast by his opponents as either a dangerous anti-Roman zealot inciting insurrection or as someone who has no respect for Moses and the torah.

Jesus doesn't immediately respond, instead writing in the dirt. His response is that the one without sin should throw the first stone. Franciscan priest Fr. Joe Nangle writes that with his response, Jesus invites all those gathered to "view the sin of those accused through our own sinfulness," a stunning challenge when we think about it, because typically we view the sins of other's through our own comparative righteousness. Yes, we may be sinners too, but that person's sin is so much worse than ours! Such thinking would have been typical of Jesus' audience as well, including the Pharisees and scribes. It is doubtful that anyone present for this scene would have answered the question "Are you sinless?" in the positive. But what is operating here, and what Jesus undermines with his answer, is his opponents' belief in a hierarchy of sin, where certain sins are more horrific and therefore more deserving of punishment or greater punishment than others. It isn't that the woman is a sinner—it is that these MEN find her sin to be more repugnant, more repulsive, more everything than their own. Adultery—particularly a woman's adultery (it takes two to tango yet the man caught in adultery is nowhere to be found)—trumps hypocrisy or pride or sloth or greed. Her adultery trumps every transgression, every sin that any of them has committed. But Jesus says NO to their—and our—desire to create a hierarchy of sin where some sins are worse than others (and maybe Jesus specifically says no to the hierarchy of sins created by men to obscure their own misconduct while they shine a light on the misconduct of women). Jesus says sin is sin is sin—and we are all guilty.

The passage ends, of course, with all those who were present leaving the scene, until Jesus is alone with the woman. And here Jesus again shows the difference between himself and religious authority gone astray: Jesus speaks to the woman, the first time the woman is treated as a subject, with inherent worth and dignity—not an object, not something to be used, a tool, a prop, a means to some other end—but as a person, created in the image and likeness of God. And despite whatever sinfulness she had participated in, he withholds his condemnation.

Jesus resists our attempts to draw lines, placing some of us in the circle—"the adulterers"—and others of us outside the circle—the "good" people, who while sinful, are at least not as bad as those in the circle, those adulterers. Such circles exist to make us feel better about ourselves while we point our fingers at those bad people who are so much worse than we are. Jesus invites us to see "the accused through our own sinfulness," not our comparative righteousness. And to take up our place in the circle with them, in the community of sinners.

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