

Rescue – Embrace – Heal

Some of us might remember when President Obama was in Rome and he stopped by the Vatican for a visit with Pope Benedict. While in the Pope's office, he noted a bright red phone on the Pope's desk and asked the Pope if it is a special phone. Pope Benedict said: "Oh yes, it is a special line directly to God." But, he also said that he only used it on rare occasions when he had very special questions, because it costs \$20,000 per phone call! President Obama was quite impressed.

A couple of years later the President was in Dublin, Ireland and he stopped in for a visit with the Archbishop and noted that he too had a bright red phone on his desk. Mr. Obama asked the Archbishop if that too was a special phone. The Archbishop said: "Yes, that red phone is a special direct line to God; whenever I have a question or problem I just pick-up the direct line and chat with God."

President Obama responded "Isn't it awfully expensive? The Pope's direct line to God costs \$20,000 a call." "Oh no," said the Archbishop: "Here in Ireland, it's simply a local call!"

Happy St. Patrick's Day!!!

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My sisters and brothers, today's Gospel story of the woman 'caught in the very act of adultery' is a tremendously powerful teaching for us as disciples, followers of Jesus and the story can be a useful reflection on the historic election that took place in our Church this week and can tie that reflection to the role of leadership in the Church. This gospel scene sums up the whole Gospel --- Jesus' whole life's message, as well as the crisis in our world today. The story presents us with a choice...

...the choice between

- violence or nonviolence
- murder or mercy
- condemnation or compassion
- revenge or reconciliation
- death or life.

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Just picture the scene: Much to the dismay and resentment of the religious leaders of Jerusalem (the Scribes and Pharisees), Jesus is teaching in the Temple and has attracted a large crowd. In an attempt to catch Jesus in a theological heresy, the religious authorities bring in a woman who had just been caught in the act of adultery and they stand her in the middle of the crowd of men. Just imagine how that woman must have felt standing there ...exposed, ...half dressed, ... with that crowd of men staring at her...

A woman in those days of sexism and patriarchy was considered, by the men, to be property, only half-human and – branded with the sin of adultery – a piece of worthless garbage. Imagine the fear in the heart of this woman: capital punishment was the response to this crime in those days... (for women, of course, since men were rarely charged – even in the crime of adultery!) Although it was the Romans who legally crucified troublemakers, the religious authorities sanctioned stoning lawbreakers to death. These men, staring with disgust at this half-dressed woman, had the legal support to condemn her to death right there in the Temple – the holiest ground in the Judaic world, and then to actually stone her to death themselves. With ideological, patriarchal venom dripping from their mouths and jealously and murder raging in their hearts, the religious authorities questioned Jesus:

“Jesus, in the Law, Moses commanded us to stone such women. So what do you say?”

Jesus is in a dilemma: *if he condemns the woman*, not only does he undermine everything he has taught and stood for (love, compassion, mercy and forgiveness) but also puts himself in trouble with the Roman authorities. *If he does not condemn the woman*, he breaks the Judaic Law – and so the religious authorities have him pinned between a rock and a hard place... .

My sisters and brothers, what Jesus does next is amazing and is a required teachable moment for each of us as his disciples, his followers in 2013.

Jesus *must* be the most disarming person the world has ever known: his spiritual peace and love so very deeply touched the hearts of those with whom he connected! Over the centuries we have glimpsed his disarming power in spiritual figures like Francis of Assisi, Gandhi and Mother Theresa.

In bending over and writing in the sand, Jesus distracts the hostile men from their rage, he creates a space that de-escalates the crisis and draws these men – in a disarming, gentle way – to look into their own hearts. And then: when he knows he has their attention, Jesus stands up and with deep love and peace, issues one of the greatest of Commandments:

“Let the one without sin cast the first stone.”

His piercing truth disarms the religious authorities, and, beginning with the elders who realize their own violence, sinfulness and complicity, they unclench their fists – dropping their stones – and walk away, heads bowed in silence.

My sisters and brothers, this amazing story does not end there. The frightened half-dressed woman now stands alone with Jesus, and he addresses her by saying: “Woman...,”

“Woman”! – a title of honor, a title that Jesus called Mary, his mother, twice in the Gospels – once in Cana and once when on the Cross – a title recognizing her full humanity, blessed and precious in God’s eyes:

“Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?”

“No one, Sir.”

“Neither do I condemn you. Go, and from now on, try not to sin anymore.”

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My sisters and brothers, this powerful story in John's Gospel is a snapshot of what the life and ministry and vision and mission of Jesus is all about. In this story, we see revealed in Jesus, a merciful – not revengeful – God, a God of compassion and of nonviolence. In resisting death and disarming the theologians, the fundamentalists and the would-be executioners, Jesus saves the condemned, and Jesus saves and redeems and liberates us all.

My brothers and sisters, at an historic moment 2000+ years later, we gather as members of the Roman Catholic Church – 1.3 billion of us – who through baptism and our weekly gathering at the Eucharist, receive the Body of Christ in order to more deeply become the Body of Christ – alive in our world today. Proclaiming, by word and example, the vision and mission of Jesus so vividly portrayed in this powerful Gospel story that chooses:

- nonviolence over violence,
- mercy over murder,
- compassion over judgment,
- reconciliation over revenge,
- life over death.

“Be merciful, just as your God is merciful: stop judging and you will not be judged, stop condemning and you will not be condemned, forgive and you will be forgiven, give and gifts will be given to you.”

My sisters and brothers, this past Wednesday, 115 Cardinals at the Vatican – the central headquarters of the Church – elected a new Pope to fill the Office of Peter, an Office whose primary responsibility – essential responsibility – according to Canon Law 17-17 is: “the salvation of souls,” in other words: to rescue and embrace and heal the woman caught in adultery and to rescue and embrace and heal us all. The Office of Peter exists to feed the members of Jesus' flock with the Bread of Life and to teach by word and deed how to become what we receive in the Eucharist: the Body of Christ.

But as Church historians often point out, one of the great occupational hazards of religion is that too often the essentials become incidentals and the incidentals are treated as essentials. How often in our 2000+ years has the essential, beautiful responsibility of the Office of Peter been sidetracked by the nonessentials, the trappings, the “fluff”? Can you picture the Jesus of today's Gospel standing with the woman caught in adultery, as

- head of Vatican state...?
- head of the Vatican government...?
- head of the Vatican bank...?
- head of a Vatican militia...?

Jesus would turn over in his grave – *if he were still in it!* – with the thought of having to oversee a vast bureaucracy created to manage non-essentials – which at its worst becomes paralyzed by financial and sexual scandals, in-fighting for power and prestige, stuck in the glory of the days of old patriarchal absolute monarchy, and at its best is dysfunctional! My brothers and sisters, this is not – by any stretch of the imagination – the rock on which Jesus planned to build the church! My guess is that poor Pope Benedict didn't resign of exhaustion from saving souls, but from the exhaustion of seemingly endless rearranging of chairs on the Titanic! Of trying to save a patriarchal, medieval, encrusted bureaucracy that can no longer function in the 21st century from imploding!

Joan Chittister, a Benedictine sister and author, in an article on Friday, described well the feeling of many awaiting the election of the new Pope: “Being filled with such hope with the breakthrough of the second Vatican Council, only to be disappointed with the retrenchment of the hierarchy in the last 30 years, so many have become just plain weary.” She wrote:

“The problem is that weariness is far worse than anger, far more paralyzing than mere indifference. Weariness comes from a soul whose hope has been disappointed one time too many. To be weary is not a condition of the body – that's tiredness. No, weariness is a condition of the heart that has lost the energy to love anymore.

“People are weary of hearing more about the laws of the church than the love of Jesus.

“People are weary of seeing whole classes of people: women, gays and even other faith communities again rejected, labeled, seen as deficient, crossed-off the list of the acceptable.

“People are weary of seeing contraception treated as more sinful than the sexual abuse of children.

“Weariness is a very dangerous thing: when people are weary they ceased to care, they cease to listen, they cease to wait....

“Perhaps that's why ‘former Catholics’ are the second largest Christian denomination in America.”

My sisters and brothers, I don't know about you, but on Wednesday afternoon when the new Pope – a simple, humble, pastoral priest, the first Pope from Latin America, who chose the name Francis, who refused to live in the Cardinal's mansion, who doesn't own a car and rides the bus, cooks his own meals, wanders the slums of his city embracing the poor, scolding the priests who refuse to baptize the children of unwed mothers – presented himself on the balcony of St. Peter's in a simple white cassock lacking the brocaded fashion of a ‘Pontiff,’ when the 76-year-old cleric bowed to the people and asked the people to pray a blessing upon him before he blessed them – my weariness lifted and my heart was once again filled with hope that our beloved church, as it has countless times in the last 2000 years, may once again – with the aid of the Spirit – shake off the shackles of the incidentals and become more the church Jesus intended it to be.

My brothers and sisters, like the rest of us, Pope Francis does not come to us without his baggage, and like the 114 Cardinals who elected him, to date refuses to even dialogue on issues that are divisive and causing much pain in our church despite little or no scriptural or theological data to back them up. An example of this pain is expressed in a note I received from a parishioner who, with his gay partner, has adopted and is doing a tremendous job raising a beautiful child. His note said in part:

“I wish I could share all this hope, but since my family is still viewed by this Pope as an “abomination,” I also shed tears, but they are not of joy.”

My sisters and brothers, as a Parish we are in the process of reflecting on our Mission, as Catholic Christians, our essential bottom-line is that we are to be Jesus – to be The Body of Christ. St. Francis was a Christian who listened and dialogued with the entire universe and every creature within it. If this Pope Francis too is a listener there is hope for reconciliation, hope for healing, and hope for development of the church.

Amen!