

### An Encounter with Jesus

Every time I mentioned to someone that I had this opportunity to break-open today's Scriptures, I got very much the same response – which included two questions: The first of which was always: “Adultery takes two - so where was the man?” The second question invariably was: “What was Jesus writing in the sand?”

Then once I got into the process of pondering and reading commentaries on the texts, I discovered more controversies and debates:

- Perhaps this passage isn't original to John's Gospel [the consensus is: probably not]... so: how did it get inserted into the text and by who, and why?
- Then there's a great legalistic debate about what exactly was going on: The question here is whether this woman was actually guilty of adultery (meaning that she was already betrothed or married) or of fornication (meaning that she was single). The Greek word used in this translation does mean 'adultery,' however, there appears to be a debate about whether, if that were the case, stoning would have been the designated penalty... Leviticus does establish death as the penalty for adultery, but does not prescribe the method. The Mishnah (Jewish teachings regarding the law), sets strangulation for adultery. However, Ezekiel suggests that stoning may also have been used. Technicalities... SO relevant when justifying killing someone...
- Then, as many of us would recall, during this time, only the Roman government had the legal authority to exercise capital punishment, but there is some evidence that Jewish authorities were willing to violate this law, to execute women. (Hmm!)
- And, importantly, it should be noted that the law that required the execution of the woman does also requires the execution of the man who was her partner in sin. But as we know, our Gospel story makes no mention of the man. Perhaps in that patriarchal society, people were more likely to excuse a man than a woman for sexual sin... (can you imagine?).

One could, I suppose, spend a great deal of energy exploring all these legal intricacies and human dynamics (I can tell you there's lots written about it all...)

But then, do any of these incidentals really matter to us as we bring our Lenten reflections to a finale? It is clear that the scribes and Pharisees are up to something quite beyond the “facts” of this incident and that these texts are given to us on the Sunday before Palm/Passion Sunday, is not – I think – designed to draw us into these ‘heady’ debates.

It is really Jesus who is on trial here. Jesus' entire life and ministry has challenged the oppressive legalistic and patriarchal systems with which the Jewish leaders were compliant.

The scribes (who are expert interpreters of the law) and Pharisees (well-known for their careful observance of the law) had seen Jesus deal mercifully with sinners, and hope that by showing that he has strayed beyond the boundaries of the law – to do away with him.

It isn't hard to imagine the shame and fear that the woman in this story experiences. If we take literally that she and her partner were "caught in the very act," that would be traumatic enough. Now she is thrust into a public forum where her sin is openly announced. The charges against her call for the death penalty, and it seems quite possible that she will be brutally executed within the next few hours. All of this means nothing to her accusers, however. The scribes and Pharisees see her, not as a human being, but as a tool that they can use to entrap Jesus. They care nothing about her as a person.

It is difficult to imagine how any person could be more fearful than this woman is at this moment... or maybe not so difficult as we look at the thousands of women at border... the millions throughout our world oppressed, fleeing for their lives and the lives of their children...

In fairness, however, I think we must at least consider the fact that the scribes and Pharisees understood their devotion to enforcing Mosaic Law as a way of expressing their devotion to God. This story wouldn't make any sense if we failed to acknowledge their legitimate concern for law-keeping; if we painted them as wholly evil we would be wrong. These aren't bad men, as much as men captive of their time and place – actually trying to be good as they understood it. The story of Jesus' opponents isn't the story of thoroughgoing evil, as much as the story of goodness which has lost its way.

So when we get down to it; here again we find Jesus faced with bringing meaning to the "mess" of humanity – as Kathy O'Connell put it last week.

Two kinds of people encountered Jesus that day. The religious leaders who thought if they were smart enough, worked hard enough, prayed hard enough, followed the letter of the law well enough... that the God they feared would be appeased and they would earn their way into Paradise. The woman had probably given up. She felt hopelessly trapped in a world of sin; of being – and allowing herself to be – used and abused. "God" could never love "her." "God" could never forgive "her." "God" probably didn't even THINK about "her" ...

Then we know what happens: Jesus, literally in that space – the 'divide' – between the law and mercy refuses to be drawn into any of the controversies or yield to simple dualistic judgement.

The law dictated that "The hand of the witnesses shall be first on him to put him to death, and afterward the hand of all the people" (Deuteronomy 17:7).

But Jesus goes beyond the requirement of the law. He does not tell the scribes and Pharisees that, acting as witnesses, they must throw the first stone. Instead, he invites any of them who is without sin to cast the first stone.

Jesus' challenge hit home. The elders – the more experienced among the men – understand quickly that Jesus sees through their scheme and that they are outmaneuvered, so deem it better to retreat rather than to stand and argue with someone who so easily turned their most potent challenge to his own advantage. And, their quiet retreat acknowledges their 'consciousness of guilt.'

Then, Jesus rises again from writing on the ground. This time, though, he does so, not to face his opponents, but to face the woman. And here, I know Kathleen Owens would want us to imagine how Jesus looked at her in that moment ... so unlike the way the other men – maybe every man – had always looked at her ...; and how that encounter changed the way she was able to look at herself...

Jesus doesn't ask the woman whether she is guilty, but only whether anyone condemns her. This question serves to bring home to the woman the full reality of the fact that *she no longer has to fear anything from those who had threatened her life!* She is free to move on to a new life....

She said, "No one, Teacher;" and Jesus – of course, if I may state the obvious, the only one present who was without sin – said, "I do not condemn you either. Go on your way – but from now on, do not sin anymore." [Now, the next chapter of her story is one I'd really like to know!]

This Jesus – the Christ– neither condemns nor excuses her. His statement doesn't patronize her - but *mercifully acknowledges her reality*, and – just as he had done with the men involved, he simply offers her a way out and a chance for a new life. "Look," as Isaiah says of our God in the 1<sup>st</sup> Reading: "I am doing something new! Now it springs forth — can you not see it?" Are there any more hopeful words than these? This is indeed Good News!

In the end, despite all the intriguing questions and debates surrounding this Gospel that could distract us; on this Fifth Sunday of Lent, as we near the culmination of our 40-day Retreat, we are given what is really a pretty simple, sweet and reassuring story of what happens when sinful, scheming, shamed and shameful people encounter Jesus, and that is: the birth of something new... An awakening to our inner true self as Fr. Fred noted on the 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Lent; a new consciousness, a *metanoia*, as Sr. Kathy Osbelt shared on the 2<sup>nd</sup>; the rise of hope as Kathleen Owens noted the 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday; the transformation of fear as Kathy O'Connell emphasized last week...; and, as we see today: the grace of mercy and forgiveness birthing new life...

Might I mention here that we will have our Parish Penance service tomorrow evening... 7pm!

Where was the man "caught in the very act of adultery"? Likely he had been there – at the start (probably part of the whole scheme). And, as for what Jesus wrote in the sand, despite a host of plausible and intriguing speculations... we just don't know!

So, my friends, as we enter the last week of Lent before Holy Week: let us – *without fear stopping us* and, as St. Paul stresses in our 2<sup>nd</sup> Reading, *giving no thought to what lies behind* – prepare ourselves to encounter Christ and the power of the Resurrection anew!

Amen!