

The Fifth Sunday of Lent – April 2-3, 2022

In the first reading last Sunday, God told the Israelites, as they entered the promised land, that he was removing their reproach – that is --the emotional and spiritual baggage -- of their many years of suffering in slavery in Egypt. In the parable of the prodigal son Jesus showed us how God waits for us to turn back to him, and that no matter how far we have strayed from him, when we turn back to him, his one and only concern is to welcome us home.

As we now approach the great celebration of salvation through the death and resurrection of Jesus, today's Scriptures, similar to last week, lift up hopeful images of newness and transformation for us.

Isaiah prophesies to a community of Israel that had forgotten its identity as the "People of God. Repeatedly, they had turned away from love of God and neighbor. The Old Testament sees their exile in Babylon as God's just punishment designed to turn the people back their covenant relationship with God.

Isaiah assures the exiles still in Babylon, that God is ending their years of captivity and has begun a great renewal for them. God says to them – "Remember not the events of the past . . . see, I am doing something new!" As God puts water in the desert and makes a way through the wasteland, all creation is glad and God waits also for the "people he formed for himself, to respond and sing his praise.

In the story of the woman caught in adultery in the Gospel of God, we see the compassion and mercy offered to all, no matter what the offense-- whether of the woman accused or that of her accusers. The woman caught in adultery can only wait in fear of the application of the law to her – death by stoning. But Jesus, brings forth a new order in which even accusers reflect on and realize their own failures. In this tense scene in which hearts are hardened

against the woman and against Jesus whom they are trying to trap, Jesus creates the conditions for change. He shows us how to think “outside the box” as they say, and make us look honestly at the deeper reality.

Think back over our school years and picture some of your teachers. Our best teachers weren't necessarily those who were most entertaining, or had the best classroom control, or superior knowledge. They may have had those skills, but what made them stand out is the way they were able to help us reflect on and internalize what we were being taught. Today's Gospel shows again what a great teacher Jesus is.

Jesus could have offered his learned opinion about the law, but they would have simply countered with a defense of the law. He could have simply accused everyone in the crowd of being a sinner. But that would not have helped them turn away from what the law allowed. (After all, she was the one caught in her sin and they were not). Actually, he could have exposed their hypocrisy by pointing out that the law actually commanded that both the man and woman involved in adultery should be stoned, yet the man involved is not mentioned or referred to at all, only the woman.

But what Jesus does instead of condemning either the woman or her accusers is to create a pause or space in this interaction that is long enough to create a shift in the atmosphere.

People have wondered what Jesus might have been writing when bent to the ground, but perhaps that is not where the focus should be. Perhaps it should be on his skill in creating a holy space in the middle of the madness and anger and judgement. Perhaps it is a skill that we can work on in our own lives when it would be easier to act in haste, and simpler to judge others rather than walk with them in love toward the transformation that God wants to bring about in all. Jesus turns the attention away from the woman

standing in front of them, and instead, puts up a mirror for the crowd to examine their own moral condition. --- “Let the one among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” Talk about an examination of conscience! Who could have picked up a stone then?

In that one statement Jesus unveils the false sense of superiority not only for those in the crowd at the Jerusalem temple – he also lifts the veil for us to see what lies in our own hearts. More importantly, Jesus reminds us that we are not defined by our sin nor by the judgement of others. We are rather defined by the mercy Jesus shows in his encounter with the woman and with the crowd.

On this fifth Sunday of Lent, we can be assured that, just as God opened a way in the sea for slaves to escape Egypt, he opens a way for us to be set free from sin or whatever binds us. Just as Jesus freed the woman from the stain of her sin, released the crowd from their cooperation and hypocrisy in condemning her, Jesus can do the same for us.

When Paul says in today’s second reading that he desires to be conformed to the death of Jesus – he is challenging us to accept the grace Jesus offers us in his dying. Namely, he is challenging us to die to those things in us that might make us feel morally superior to others, those attitudes that fight against humility and ignore our own need for the grace of God’s mercy.

Let’s also imitate Jesus and create in our lives some holy pause or time to breath when we are angry or judgemental – some time to reach out for God’s wisdom, some time to thank God for the second chances we have received, and some time for the power of God’s love transform the situation, and for God to open new paths for us in unexpected ways and places. This is what we will celebrate in Holy Week. --- “Although they went forth weeping, carrying the seed to be sown, they shall come back rejoicing, carrying their sheaves.”