

Jesus and the Adulteress

Homily at St. John of God Church, San Francisco

January 31, 2010

by

Deacon Brian Bromberger

A couple moved into a new neighborhood. Early one morning while they were eating breakfast, the wife looked out her window and saw her neighbor hanging laundry out on the line to dry. And she noticed the wash was dirty and dingy. She remarked to her husband, "That neighbor doesn't know how to wash. Her clothes are not clean. I wonder if she **even** uses detergent." Day after day, she made the same comments, "I can't believe she lets her family wear those grimy, shabby clothes." Several weeks later, she looked out her window and saw the clothes were just as bright and clean and beautiful as could be. She was so surprised, she called her husband and said, "Look, the lady finally learned how to wash! I wonder what happened?" The husband smiled and replied, "Honey, I got up early this morning and **cleaned** our window!"

How dirty our neighbor's laundry, is dependent on how **clean** our own window is, reflects a similar theme in our Gospel, where the problem is not only a woman's adulterous sin, but also the tainted window by which the Pharisees were viewing her. Jesus's encounter with the adulteress is a **trap** set up by the Pharisees. The Pharisees could care **less** about justice for the woman. She's just a nameless dehumanized decoy to them. They know that if Jesus says the woman should be stoned, he will be contradicting Roman law, as the Jews didn't have the right under Roman occupation to inflict the death penalty. Conversely, if Jesus says the woman should **not** be stoned, he will be disobeying the law of Moses which dictates stoning for the crime of adultery. Jesus seems to be in a **no win** situation similar to one of those old Western movies where a posse has arrested some gang for stealing horses. When somebody mentions that maybe they should give them a fair trial before their punishment, one of the men in the posse hollers, "Yeah, let's give them a fair trial and then hang 'em." The story raises numerous questions such as **where** is the **man** with whom the woman was consorting, as adultery is one of those sins, where with the possible exception of former President Jimmy Carter lusting in his heart, you usually need **two** to tango. Also, the Greek is very explicit and literal when it says the woman was caught in the **very** act of adultery, meaning *in flagrante dilecto*, to quote the Latin. So there stands the woman if not fully exposed, is scantily clad at best, humiliated, forced to stand alone in front of a leering, ridiculing, bullying crowd of men, a victim of a patriarchal, sexist judicial system. One has to ask were the Pharisees, Peeping Toms, waiting to catch the woman in the middle of her sin? And of course, everyone has wondered what Jesus wrote in the sand, though not even the author of this incident knew. Despite these ambiguities, I think the key to understanding this passage is to realize there are **two** categories of sinners here, the adulteress and the Pharisee/mob. The adulteress represents the one who says, "I'm the only one who can decide what is right or wrong for **me**," so she breaks moral laws and sets her own course. The Pharisees, and by labeling them such, I mean **not** Jews in general, but rather the attitude of moral conformity present in **all** religious traditions, which says I'm going to do what tradition and the community wants me to do and so **should** everyone else. The barrier between them and God is their pride and self-righteousness concerning their own moral

achievements. Because they have not disobeyed God, they now feel they have **earned** the right to tell God what to do. By living moral lives, they want to control God and put God in a position where they think God owes them. They believe God ought to bless and give them a happy smooth life because they have worked so hard to obey God and be a good person. All their morality is just a way to **use** God and make God give them all the things in life they want and feel they deserve. Essentially, they are putting **themselves** in the place of God as Savior, Lord, and Judge, which might I add, is a different way of understanding **sin**, rather than the **standard** definition of just breaking the rules. So the Pharisees feel superior to people around them, whom they perceive as not being righteous enough, or more accurately, as righteous as **they** are. They embody a quote from Alice Roosevelt Longworth, the daughter of President Theodore Roosevelt, when she said, “If you haven’t got anything nice to say about anybody, come sit next to me.” Ultimately, the Pharisees live good lives out of fear, not out of joy and love, as they are being moral only for their **own** benefit and they can never be certain God **really** loves them, as they are never sure they have been good **enough**. Pharisees tend to be angry, because life never goes as they might wish and they always feel they are owed **more** than what they are getting.

And here we witness Jesus as the center of calm and reassurance amidst all the pandemonium. His exhortation that those without sin be the first to throw a stone, is a reminder to the accusers of their own need for repentance. The prerequisite for receiving the grace of God **is** to know you **need** it. By dropping their stones and leaving, the men in the mob are admitting they are just as guilty as the woman, since they share the same fallible humanity, as she whom they were judging. As the nuns used to remind us as children, if we point a finger at someone else, aren’t **3** fingers pointed back at ourselves, as we recognize the depth of our own limitations to live as God’s disciples. When a 1910 newspaper posed the question, “What’s wrong with the world today?” the Catholic thinker G.K. Chesterton wrote a brief letter in reply: “Dear Sirs: I am. Sincerely, G.K. Chesterton.” What is crucial in this passage is Jesus choosing **mercy** as his solution to judgment for both the adulteress and the mob. Jesus asks the woman **two** questions, expressing solidarity with her and restoring her dignity. He addresses her as **you**, not as an object, and by calling her woman, in the Greek text, he is giving her a title of honor, the same name Jesus called his mother Mary. We witness the lavish extravagance of God’s grace, because even **before** the woman can voice her repentance, she **is given** absolution. The woman is pulled away from her past and propelled into a future where God is doing some thing **new**. But Jesus’ mercy extends **also** to her accusers because by returning to his writing in the sand a **second** time, he turns his gaze away from them, enabling the individual members of the mob to slip away one by one without losing face, allowing them to begin cultivating compassion and forgiveness toward themselves, as well as preventing further sin and violence.

The truth is that at one time or another we are **all** the adulteress and the Pharisees. We can all affirm a quote by secular critic Quentin Crisp when he commented, “The very purpose of existence is to reconcile the glowing opinion we have of ourselves, with the **appalling** things that other people think about us and say behind our backs.” We have more than enough of our own sin to struggle with, without being consumed by the sins of other people. Sadly many people today have abandoned **any** kind of religious faith because they see major religions as full of Pharisees, observing believers as guilt-and-fear

ridden, condescending, condemning, anxious, joyless, angry, and spiritually blind, with some of the most terrible sins committed by **devout** people in the name of promoting righteousness or “family values.” But Jesus gives us hope by showing us there is a way to know God that doesn’t end in moralism and religiosity, through the merciful compassion shown the adulteress and the Pharisees and in putting our ultimate hope and trust not in other people or things, but in God. We are always given a chance to start over, no matter how much we may have messed up our lives and relationships. We can stand naked before the Lord, totally vulnerable in our failures, stripped of our defenses and excuses, yet draw enormous comfort because this incident shows us that the **one** who will judge us most **finally**, will **also** be the one who loves us most **fully**, the wise and kind judge more focused on mercy and rehabilitation **than** punishment and death. An English bishop sat for his portrait. Friends said to him, “I hope the artist does you justice,” to which the bishop replied, “At my age and at this stage, I ask for mercy, not justice.” And so do we, because God by continually being compassionately present to us, **where we are**, and forgiving us, makes us new, loving us into submission, so eventually we can surrender our sense of superiority.

We are now invited into a world of change without condemnation, with all judgment of this world being done in the hope that we will embrace the new life being offered to us. Having been given mercy by God, we are then called to **be** agents of God’s mercy in this world. We can come to the altar for Eucharist knowing we are free from the burden of judging and being judged, and accepted as **we are**; vindicated by the unconditional love of Jesus, we are given the courage and nourishment to be the faith-filled disciples God desires us to be. We can be **bold** in our faith with no fear of falling, because we are surrounded by the safety net of God’s generous mercy, which to quote Portia from Shakespeare’s play, *Merchant of Venice*, “is never strained and droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven.” As we head towards Holy Week, we are reminded again of the mystery of the passion, that only when we are stripped and emptied of everything that is false and keeps us from worshipping and relying on God alone, can we be filled with the bountiful **new** life which is the resurrection. Yes, through Lent, we may come to see how **dirty** our windows really are, but more importantly we realize it is **Jesus** who will compassionately help us to clean them, so that the brightness of his Easter glory, can be reflected more clearly, through **us**!