

Homily for March 21, 2010 (5th Sunday in Ordinary Time, C)
Isaiah 43:16-21; Psalm 126:1-6; Philippians 3:8-14; John 8:1-11
“If You Are Ready to Cast a Stone Then Get Ready to Catch Some Boulders!”

In Luke 6:41-42, Jesus famously cautions against the dangers of pointing out the sins of others while failing to acknowledge our own:

“Why do you look at the speck in your brother’s eye while failing to notice the plank in your own eye? Hypocrite! Remove the plank from your own eye first; then you will be able to see clearly and remove the speck from your brother’s eye.”

Today’s gospel reading might contain a similar warning: “Don’t get ready to cast a stone unless you’re ready to have a boulder coming back at you!” The story of the woman caught in the act of adultery is featured only in St. John’s gospel, yet it remains one of the most compelling in the Bible. Besides the sheer drama of stopping a mob execution, it reveals the depth of Jesus’ divine compassion as well as his profound understanding of human nature (John 2:25).

The Pharisees, who by this point in John’s gospel were in open conflict with Jesus and demanding that he perform signs to demonstrate that he was the Messiah, brought before him a woman caught *in flagrante delicto* in the act of adultery. This begs the question: if the woman was “caught in the act,” then what happened to her partner? Why didn’t the Pharisees also drag him into the middle of the crowd and demand that Jesus pass judgment on him?

The truth, of course, is that although the Pharisees thought they had the law on their side they weren’t really interested in justice. Their real motive was to try and trap Jesus by putting him in a no-win situation: condemn the woman and give lie to his mercy and compassion or refuse to condemn her and be deemed guilty of violating the law of Moses. This nameless woman, a victim of their calculations as well as a patriarchal double-standard, was little more than a pawn in their game. She was, tragically, disposable. Sadly, the diminished status of women is still a reality in many parts of the world and, in too many instances, even in the Church.

Jesus wouldn’t take the Pharisees’ bait. Neither should we, even though it seems that we have built a veritable industry around stone-throwing. From the travails of Tiger Woods to the lesser-known folks who expose their infidelities, peccadilloes, and “baby mama drama” on the likes of the Maury Povich Show, we have developed an almost prurient interest in the faults and failings of others.

Some would attempt to justify this trend toward train wreck entertainment by claiming that it is little more than holding people accountable, especially those whom we hold in high esteem or who have real or contrived responsibilities to the public: public officials, professional athletes or other celebrities. Yet who among us has never been guilty of unfaithful to someone or something important to us?

While it may have seemed radical or an example of excessive liberalism to some, what Jesus did with the woman caught in the act of adultery was nothing more than putting into practice what he preached to Nicodemus (John 3:16-17):

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him might not die but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him.

In forgiving the woman Jesus did not refuse to hold her accountable for her actions. Instead he refused to condemn her. But he also admonished her, “Go, and from now on do not sin anymore.” His words have since been echoed by those penitents who, in the Act of Contrition, pray: “I firmly resolve, with the help of your grace, to sin no more and to avoid the near occasion of sin.” That was the version I learned as a child; but in more recent years, it has been modified to something that better takes into account our human weakness: “I firmly resolve, with the help of your grace, to avoid sin, to do penance, and to amend my life.”

As sinners striving to become holier people, all of us have found ourselves in some way in the place of that sinful woman: “caught in the act,” criticized and condemned for something we did, and perhaps even surrounded by people who held in their hands the rocks of gossip, anger, self-righteousness, and fear. More likely than not, we have also found ourselves in the place of the Pharisees and the crowd, with those same rocks in our own hands.

That’s a dangerous business, for the rocks we are so ready to hurl today could be the boulders rolling back at us tomorrow. In 1998, Rep. Bob Livingston, was one of a number of lawmakers that called upon President Bill Clinton to resign or be impeached in the wake of the Monica Lewinsky scandal. Within months, Livingston himself was forced to resign as Speaker of the House in the wake of revelations of his own extramarital affairs.

Of course we must renounce sin—that’s one of our duties as disciples of Jesus; but in doing so we must never forget that we ourselves are sinners. Further, that acknowledgement of our own sinfulness should temper how we address the faults and weaknesses of others. Even more critically, we are called to announce grace, hope and reconciliation even more readily than we are to denounce sin.

Can we, like St. Paul, recognize that whatever righteousness we possess comes from God through our faith to know Christ “and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by being conformed to his death?” Can we, like the exiled people to whom the prophet Isaiah spoke, welcome the Lord’s assurance: “See, I am doing something new! Now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?” Can we, reflecting on God’s mercy in our own lives, proclaim with the psalmist: “The Lord has done great things for us; we are filled with joy!”

If so, then we may realize what Jesus may have been writing in the dust in front of the Temple that day: “Rocks are better for building than for throwing.” +