

Homily  
5LentC  
St. Bernard Church  
March 12/13, 2016

Our Gospel this evening/morning is one of the most fascinating and most mysterious passages in the Bible.

Of course, it's about being judgmental, casting stones at others, but there's so much more than that.

To unlock the mystery of the story of the adulterous woman, we have to use our curiosity and our imagination.

To keep it simple, we're just going to focus on one question: what was Jesus doing by bending down and writing on the ground with his finger? He did this twice.

There are two answers to this question.

First of all, Jesus was communicating to the entire crowd that he was the new lawgiver, the one who would dispense a new form of justice. Just as his Father had written the commandments on the tablets of stone given to Moses, Jesus was now letting the world know that the "thou shalt nots" of the ten commandments would be tempered by mercy. He then displayed this mercy by forgiving the adulterous woman and telling her to "Go and sin no more."

But Jesus had a second purpose for writing letters in the dirt, and doing it twice.

He was giving the crowd, the scribes and Pharisees, and especially the woman, time to think, time to reflect. I want us to focus on the woman in particular.

We don't know her name. We don't know anything about her except for the fact that she was caught in the act of adultery. In the gospel passage, she says nothing except for 3 little words at the end.

The woman knows the penalty for what she has done. She knows that the scribes and the Pharisees are fully prepared to administer that penalty. She knows she is going to be stoned until she dies. Her life is over.

Then she's placed in the middle of a circle. She is confused by what is going on. It then becomes clear that her fate now somehow rests in the hands of a man her accusers have called "Teacher." There is no indication that she knows anything about Jesus. But whether she lives or dies might well depend on what this stranger says to her executioners.

This man, this Teacher, doesn't say a word.

He bends down and writes on the ground with his finger. He does so very slowly, very deliberately. It's as if time has stood still. Everyone is waiting to hear what he is going to say, but he keeps writing in the dirt with his finger.

Imagine what the woman is thinking. She's probably thinking about her past, her life, her decisions. But she's also thinking about this man, this stranger, the teacher. "Who are you? Why is that you will decide whether I live or die? What are you doing, drawing letters in the dust?" You would think the woman would cry out, and beg for mercy, but she remains silent.

Jesus challenges the scribes and Pharisees to confront their own sinfulness, and they drift away.

For the woman, this man she doesn't know has saved her life. Now she is alone with him, but again she doesn't speak. She waits. Her life is still under his control.

Jesus forgives her, and sends her away.

What does the interaction between Jesus and the woman mean for us?

Well, let's start with the fact that most of us measure how well we're doing in life and even in our faith by comparing ourselves to other people, people who are in our peer group, people who are about our age and engaged in a similar lifestyle.

Imagine that you are in a large room, surrounded by people who are very similar to you, people you are generally comfortable with. Gradually, all these people leave the room, and after awhile it's just us you and one other person, and that other person is Jesus.

Jesus approaches you. He gets close. He stares into your eyes. He says nothing, but his eyes are asking questions, and you know exactly what he's asking.

"How well do you know me?" his eyes are saying. "What have you done to get to know me better?"

He gives you some time to think about this.

Then his eyes take on a different look. Now his eyes are asking, "Do you love me? How much do you love me? Have you lived your life for me?"

One of these days, the crowd will go away, at least for a time, and we'll be face to face with Jesus. At that moment, just like the woman in today's Gospel, we'll see how our decisions and our actions truly measure up.

The purpose of Lent is to give us a lengthy time for reflection, to help us prepare for that moment in the future when we will see Jesus face to face, and he will be asking us the questions we should have been thinking about every day, every moment, of our lives.

If we use this time in Lent wisely and prayerfully, perhaps by Easter we can hear the voice of Jesus, telling us in his own way, with mercy and love, "Now go and sin no more."

The true goal, the only real goal, for each of us is to be ready someday in the future to really be in the presence of Jesus, to look into his eyes, and to be filled with joy and love.