

“10 Beautiful Words”

5th Sunday of Lent (Cycle C)

Is 43:16-21; Ps 126:1-6; Phil 3:8-14; Jn 8:1-11

Last week’s parable of The Prodigal Son reminded us of

- the amazing Mercy of God the Father –
 - as He welcomed home a wayward son.

Today’s Gospel reading gives us yet another powerful story of Mercy

- where a woman is literally caught *in the very act* of adultery.
- Yet Jesus does not pass judgment on her...
 - “Neither do I condemn you,” He says. “Go and sin no more.”
- This is radical mercy
 - In fact, it’s SO radical that this Gospel passage
 - actually has a rather interesting side-story to it...
 - John chapter 8, verses 1-11, this entire Gospel reading,
 - in a number of the ancient texts
 - is missing -- it’s not there, possibly deleted
 - St. Augustine, a Doctor of the Church, around 400 A.D.
 - explained that doubts had been raised
 - about this particular passage
 - because it showed Jesus to be SO merciful
 - that some hard-liners feared it would lead
 - to a relaxation of morality
 - Therefore many copyists, as they transcribed manuscripts
 - chose to omit this story altogether.
 - (Navarre Study Bible Texts & Commentaries, St. John)
 - Some apparently feared that if people read how
 - Jesus didn’t condemn the adulteress, they might think:
 - Well, maybe adultery isn’t all that bad...
 - Or in some moral equivalence type argument say
 - “Well what I’m doing isn’t as bad as adultery
 - and Jesus gave her a pass,

- so I needn't be too worried about changing my lifestyle...
- Well praise God this beautiful story of Christ's Mercy survived!
- But it would indeed be a profound mistake to think
 - that Jesus' radical mercy somehow diminishes our call to morality.

A prime example of such a potentiality comes in the form of an article I read recently. The Catholic author

- speaks to how the Church should address same-sex couples
 - in this age of now legal same-sex civil unions.
- This is a very relevant and very sensitive issue in our Church
 - and somewhat controversial as well,
 - a hot topic of debate at the Family Synod in Rome.
 - And we should never be afraid of such thorny issues
 - but wade into them
 - with both charity and truth as our guides.
- At any rate, this author suggested that our priests
 - should be welcoming of same-sex couples in their parishes.
- And though he stopped short of recommending that pastors
 - bless these civil unions, he nonetheless endorsed
 - the couple's full participation in the Eucharist
 - and did not rule out having them teach religious education.
- I immediately wondered: Would this author also advocate that priests
 - allow a heterosexual couple cohabitating before marriage
 - to knowingly partake of the Eucharist
 - and teach religious education? I pray not.
- Or does he disagree with both Scripture and Church teaching
 - that the lifestyle of a same-sex couple is inherently sinful?
- Unfortunately, missing from this very well-meaning hospitality
 - there is no mention or even an *inference* of
 - leading them to a **conversion** of their lifestyle.
- Such moral vagary sends a confusing and potentially dangerous message

- that perhaps God is SO loving, SO merciful, SO embracing
- that He will give us a pass on our lifestyles
- Welcome them? Absolutely. But, where is the call to conversion??

In today's Gospel we read of

- the scribes and Pharisees dragging an adulteress woman before Jesus
 - Two things are going on here:
 - First -- they're once again trying to catch Jesus in a trap
 - (Under Roman occupation, the Jews didn't have the authority to issue a death sentence)
 - So, if Jesus condemns the woman to death
 - in accordance with Mosaic Law
 - the Pharisees could report him to the Romans
 - and be done with him.
 - OR, if Jesus did not sentence her to death,
 - this would be a clear violation of Mosaic Law
 - and seriously undermine his status as a rabbi...
 - Secondly -- The scribes & Pharisees have already formed their own judgment:
 - the woman is guilty of a crime punishable by death.
- Jesus, the very personification of Wisdom
 - turns their scheming, legalistic trap on its head
 - by pointing out the underlying spiritual truth.
- *"Let you who have no sin, cast the first stone."* (Jn 8:7)
- Jesus is asking them, "Who are you to judge?"
 - Pope Francis echoed this sentiment a couple of years ago:
 - "Who am I to judge?"
- You see, we are all sinners
 - *"All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God"* (Rom 3:23)
- And sure, we can try to rank sin (if you will)
 - and certainly some sins are more serious than others
 - But at the end of the day... Sin is still sin. Big sin, little sin, it's all sin.

- So for us to waste much time quibbling about various degrees of sinfulness
 - is to truly “not see the forest for the trees.”
 - Sin is sin
 - And the wages of sin -- all sin -- is death. (Rom 6:23)
 - So, truly, who are we to judge?
- And so, one by one, the scribes and Pharisees depart
 - acknowledging the Truth and Wisdom of Jesus

So Jesus spares the life of the adulteress.

- But wait a minute. I recall Jesus also said in Matthew 5:17
 - *“I did not come to abolish the law, but to fulfill it...”*
- Mosaic Law clearly calls for death in this case.
 - So how is Jesus not abolishing (or at least not ignoring) the law??
 - The answer? Jesus certainly agrees: the wages of sin IS death
 - But, in his radical Love & Mercy
 - says: I will die in your place...
 - Isaiah 53 foretells the Suffering Servant (Jesus)
 - who would surrender himself to death
 - and thru his sufferings, shall justify many
 - *“and their guilt he shall bear”* (Is 53:11)
 - God became man and was brutally executed in our place
 - it is the greatest gift in the history of mankind
 - an occasion we’ll solemnly recall as a Church in less than two weeks.

That’s very beautiful & powerful stuff, but... that’s not the end of the story.

- Jesus looks at this no-doubt trembling woman.
 - And with eyes that must have been piercing with love
 - Knowing He will soon be crucified for her... says
 - *“Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more.”* (Jn 8:11)
- Jesus receives the woman, spares her life, will go on to die in her place...
 - but He also leaves her with a challenge

- He tells her to *Go and sin no more*.
- He's calling for change of lifestyle, He's calling for true conversion.

And it's precisely there where I fear this well-meaning author falls short in his article:

- His message is so full of mercy
 - so full of sympathy and compassion for the same-sex couple
- But his message lacks the call to conversion
 - He's speaking the Truth, but not the whole Truth...
- He's got the first half of Jesus' message down pat:
 - *"Neither do I judge you."*
- But what about the second half?
 - *"Go and sin no more" ?*
- Jesus himself challenges us quite matter-of-factly in Mt 10:38
 - *"He who does not take up his cross and follow me*
 - *is not worthy of me."*
 - Is it difficult? Absolutely.
 - But even as Christ challenges us to take up our cross,
 - He also lets us know He's with us every step of the way:
 - *"Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me...*
 - *for my yoke is easy, and my burden light."* (Mt 11:29-30)

Don't get me wrong:

- This is not a bashing of those that have same-sex attraction.
 - Having same-sex attraction is not a sin.
- Neither is temptation a sin.
 - But *submitting* to temptation is absolutely a sin.
 - And living together as a "couple" – with all that implies –
 - whether same or opposite sex
 - outside the bonds of the Sacrament of Marriage
 - is a sin.
 - Both Scripture and our Catechism are very clear on this.

- So while I will not call anyone to task
 - for whatever temptations they may have in life,
- I am here to dispel even the vaguest notion
 - that Jesus is somehow “okay” with sinful lifestyles
 - that we’re not necessarily called to change our lives...
 - that Christ’s sacrifice on the cross somehow gives us a free-pass on our lifestyle choices...

The bottom line is this: When Jesus embraces us, He’s doing just that:

- Embracing US – but not our sinful lifestyles
- Jesus’ ministry was FULL of embracing sinners
 - Today with the adulteress
 - Previously tax collectors, prostitutes,
 - In a couple of weeks, even the thief on the cross
 - Christ’s Mercy is truly staggering
- But Jesus also sought
 - to lead them to healing, to conversion.
- Jesus enthusiastically meets us where we are
 - wherever we are
 - but then immediately encourages us to “*Go and sin no more.*”

Lastly and very briefly, on this 5th Sunday of Lent

I just want to touch on a couple of beautiful parallels

- between the adulteress’ encounter with Jesus
 - in today’s Gospel
- and our encounter with Jesus
 - in the Sacrament of Reconciliation

As the woman today was likely frightened of Jesus casting judgment:

- Sometimes we approach the confessional with
 - some anxiety or trepidation

- Sometimes we hear the confessional referred to jokingly
 - as “penalty box” or some other
 - negative connotation
- But the truth is far from that – as some of us got to experience for the first time this past week.

The reality is that when the adulteress stands alone before Jesus

- as we go before the priest -- who is acting in *persona Christi*
 - we quickly realize Jesus is there to welcome us with arms wide open.

And though the wages of sin is indeed death

- no condemnation was made by Jesus in the Gospel
- nor is there any judgment in the confessional – only Mercy.
 - for Jesus died in your place, just as He did for the adulteress.

And finally, just as Jesus sent the woman off

with a challenge to “Go and sin no more.”

- Likewise we also, in our Act of Contrition,
 - resolve with God’s grace, to “go and sin no more...”

Today, Jesus speaks to all of us with 10 beautiful words:

- “Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more.”
- These 10 words speak volumes about the ministry of Jesus.
 - Jesus tells us “I did not come to judge the world, but to save it.” (Jn 3:17)
 - But while we bask in His great Mercy
 - may we never lose sight of His challenge:
 - For Jesus also says, “Take up your cross and follow me.” (Mt 16:24)

In these 10 beautiful words of Jesus

- Mercy & challenge go hand in hand:
- *Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more.*