

5th Sunday of Lent - John 8:1-11

The Pharisees bring a woman caught in adultery before Jesus for judgment and Jesus said, "*Let anyone who is without sin cast the first stone at her.*" There was a sudden silence. But then all at once a small stone came flying from the back of the crowd aimed at the head of the woman, and Jesus promptly caught it. Looking at the lady standing in the crowd Jesus said, "Mother! Really!"

Hate the sin. Love the sinner. We have heard this expression hundreds of times but it still rings true. It identifies a central teaching of Jesus.

Hate the sin. Love the sinner. Today's gospel might be seen as a dramatic enactment of that saying. The sin in the story is clear. The woman was caught in the very act of adultery.

Everyone in the story, **hates** the sin: the crowd, the leaders, Jesus, even the woman herself. They are all united in hating the sin.

There is a disagreement, however, on what to do with the sinner. Some believe that she should be executed, stoned for her crime. Jesus believes that she should not. And as we watch this story unfold, three things emerge: a principle, a qualification, and a command.

The **principle** is this: No person should be equated with his or her sin. People are responsible for their sins, but no person should be defined simply by the sins they commit.

Jesus sees the sin of the woman but he sees something more. He also sees the part of the woman that remains good, the part that could change, the hope that things could be different.

This basic insight of Jesus has been reflected through subsequent centuries in Catholic teaching. For Catholics believe that the dignity and worth of every person remains despite the crimes or sins they may commit.

Regardless of the horrible things that people do, we continue to believe that the image of God within them is never completely erased.

This is why the consistent teaching in the Catholic tradition has been that the taking of human life, even when legally justified, is **only** a last resort.

This is why our Pope speaks against capital punishment, why he appeals in almost every execution that the life of the criminal be spared. You might remember that Saint John Paul II appealed for the life of Timothy McVeigh. Why?

Because the Pope believed in Jesus' fundamental **principle**: No person can be completely defined by his or her sin. There always remains a part of every person that is good, a part that can be loved.

Now this is a real challenge to us who would follow Christ. Because when people attack us, when people hurt us, we are strongly inclined to simply see them as bad people, as people without any worth or value.

Yet the teaching of Jesus reminds us that there **is** more, that there remains in each person a dignity and value that cannot be taken away. We are challenged to find that value.

Because it is only in claiming that hidden goodness that we can ever get beyond our hurt, ever reconcile ourselves to what has happened, ever find the power to forgive.

The fundamental principle, then, is that no person can be equated with his or her sin.

That leads us to the **qualification**. The qualification is: we must protect ourselves. Even as we try to recognize the good that remains in every person, we cannot be naïve and ignore the harm that can come from a person's actions.

We must take steps to prevent people from blowing up buildings, from using violence to attain their ends. We must take steps to protect ourselves from those who would manipulate us and abuse us.

Jesus says to the woman, "Go, but from now on do not sin again." Jesus is not naïve about the power of sin and neither should we be naïve.

And so as followers of Christ we are caught between a principle and a qualification. We seek some way of making these two truths work together. Even as we try to protect ourselves from the actions of those who could harm us, the teaching of Jesus propels us to keep looking for the goodness and the dignity that remains in every human person.

Therefore, as we try to gauge our response to those who attack or hurt us, we must do so with profound humility. We should never react in vengeance or hatred. We should always limit our response to the absolute minimum required to protect ourselves.

Yet we are usually inclined to go further. Once we have taken steps to protect ourselves, we still want to know if it is valid to strike back at the one who has hurt us.

This desire leads to the **command**. Jesus says to those who challenge him, “Let the one here who is without sin be the first to cast a stone at her.”

When we ask whether we can respond in violence beyond the need to protect ourselves, Jesus says we can, but only if we are without sin.

That pretty much settles the matter, doesn't it? Jesus has given us a command that we cannot follow, for none of us are without sin ourselves.

Clearly, if we would follow His command, there will be no throwing of stones here. AMEN.