

April 7, 2019 5th Sunday of Lent

Before I start my homily I want to point out something in the gospel that most people don't stop and think about. Look at what they say, "This woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery." Who was watching? These guys were watching; they were going through town looking through windows trying to see who was doing what. These guys were peeping Toms and perverts. So, it's not always nice and clean in the gospel readings. These guys were actually admitting to doing those kinds of things. They were really looking hard to find someone to use against Jesus. Now when you hear that, you'll think, wow! they were really trying to get Him.

There was an air force colonel who served as an inspector general for his command and he paid particular attention to how the personnel wore their uniforms. On one occasion, the colonel spotted a junior airman and he looked at him and he said, "Airman, what do you do when a shirt is unbuttoned?" The startled airman replied, "Button it, sir." The colonel looked down at him, in the eyes and said, "Well?" The airman nervously reached over and buttoned the colonel's pocket.

In England there was a Christian physician named Dr. Cronin. One night he assigned a young nurse to a little boy who had been brought to the hospital with diphtheria and given an only slight chance to live. A tube was entered into the boy's throat to help him breathe and it was the nurse's job to periodically clean out the tube. As the nurse sat beside the boy's bed, she accidentally dozed off. She awakened to find the tube had become blocked. Instead of following instructions she panicked. Hysterically, she called the doctor from his home and by the time the doctor got there the boy was dead. The doctor was so angry, he went to his office and wrote his recommendation to the hospital board that they expel her immediately from the hospital. He called her in to read it, his voice trembling with anger. She stood there in pitiful silence, the tall and gawky Welsh girl. She nearly fainted with shame and remorse. Well said Dr. Cronin in a harsh voice, "Have you nothing to say for yourself?" There was more silence. Then she added this pitiful plea, "Please give me another chance." Dr. Cronin sent her away, but he went home and he couldn't sleep that night. He kept hearing some words from the dark distance, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive others who trespass against us." The next morning the doctor went to his desk and tore up the report. In the years that followed, he watched as his nurse became the head of a large hospital, one of the most honored nurses in all of England.

Today in the incident we read about, the woman caught in adultery, happened in Jerusalem, inside the temple precincts. Jesus was teaching there; Jesus was an important person, He was a teacher, Jesus could read and write. Jesus was one of the very very very few who could do that. Now you have to look at this phrase, Scribes and Pharisees. Scribes were a particular group that had training in scripture and the interpretation of Jewish law. The Pharisees were a lay movement who decided that they wanted to bring God's law into all parts of life, so they constructed 663 rules for you to follow each day to be holy and to be a Jew. When we see Scribes and Pharisees in that phrase, it's usually everybody who's opposed to Jesus. So, they brought forward this woman that they had been watching (outside the window), and it was a very bad scenario, heart wrenching, calculated to cause her ultimate shame. The ultimate penalty for adultery was stoning to death, but there's no evidence that that ever happened (not in Roman times anyway because you couldn't do that). Stoning was done mostly in cases of blasphemy, such as the case with Saint Stephen when he said he could see the Son of God coming in the

clouds with angels and they stoned him and Saint Paul was over there holding their cloaks. The Jewish criminal code recognized three sins punishable by death: idolatry, murder, and adultery. The book of Deuteronomy in the Old Testament says, you have to kill a woman by strangulation for adultery, otherwise you could stone her. The interesting thing is, it also says, you stone both parties, the man and the woman. So when the Pharisees bring this woman in, they are not looking to fulfill the law, they are actually looking for a way to trap Jesus. The theologian, F.B. Myers says, "It's a terrible thing for a sinner to fall into the hands of fellow sinners." They wanted to embarrass Jesus because He had the reputation of proclaiming God's mercy toward sinners. If He insisted on following the law exactly, His reputation as an agent of God's mercy would be in jeopardy. If He sent her to her death by strangulation or stoning He'd be violating the Roman law which prevented killing by anybody but Roman citizens. If He took the side of the adulterous woman, He was open to the charge of ignoring God's law and God's justice as given by Moses. It's a very ingenious trap, but of course you and I know who Jesus is and there's no way to trap Him. So, Jesus ignored the whole thing; disinterested, didn't want anything to do with it. Kind of like sometimes with the supreme court, "No, we're not going to hear that one." So, Jesus is writing on the ground. I cannot tell you how many books, how many sermons, how many everything has been written and talked about, "What was He writing on the ground?" Saint Augustin says He was writing the sins of the accusers. Other people say he was doodling, just putting art work in the sand. On and on and on. But, because of the way they set it up, He was the only one who could judge her. No one else had the authority because of the way they set it up. The woman waited in shame to hear Jesus's verdict. She knew she was guilty; she'd already passed judgment on herself. She accepted Jesus's right to do so, but Jesus understood the secret intentions; He knew they were trying to trap Him. He knew they weren't trying to honor God's law and put it through, so He said, "Let the one among you without sin throw the first stone." All of a sudden this stone comes and hits the woman and Jesus says "Mother! I was trying to make a point." ... So by saying, "Let the one without sin among you cast the first stone." He turned it back on the accusers. He made them realize, they too were sinners.

Saint Augustine puts it this way, "Let this woman be punished, but not by sinners. Let the law be applied, but not by its' transgressors." In other words, only God can judge. Thus, Jesus escapes the trap by leaving it up to them, their consciences, in the silence of course. The elders are the ones who brought her. The elders are the ones who accused her because that is the way it worked. So, beginning with the eldest, they started going away, silently. They were the ones who would have brought the first stone. The elders left the scene first the youngsters followed after them. So, by appealing to the justice of God and not the injustice of humans, Jesus upheld God's mercy. The moral of the story is not that sin is not important, it's very important, or that God does not punish sin, God extends mercy to repentant sinners in order that they may turn away from their sins. This is the basis by the way, for the Church's not wanting to have the death penalty anymore, in most cases. Because we want the sinner to have a chance to repent and if we go ahead and kill them; an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, they don't have that chance. So we give them as much chance as possible to repent. Many sinners, many murderers on death row, have repented and have started practicing the Christian faith. So Jesus showed tremendous mercy by doing what? Dying on the cross. But you know, sometimes you and I are like the Pharisees, ready to spread scandal about others without remembering we're sinners too. That's why God doesn't want us to judge, because we're looking through this cloudy viewpoint of sin. Saint Paul said if we judged ourselves, there would be no judgement. "Oh, I'm not a sinner, oh I'm a good person,

God will never send me to hell. Oh, I'm a good driver, everybody else is bad." We never judge ourselves, correctly. We always look to see, "Oh, I'm good, I'm okay."

Like Dr. Cronin with the nurse, we have to remember what it says in the Our Father, "Forgive our transgressions as we forgive those who transgress against us." We have to make the first move. We have to be the bringers of mercy and Jesus shows us how to do this. No, we do not say that sin is okay, we say that sin is bad, we say the sinner is the person we need to love. The Church says this, "Hate the sin but love the sinner." Jesus gave this woman a chance to repent and we know that she did. And Jesus says, "Go and sin no more." Jesus gave her all the options and she repented. This is the chance we have to give others as well because by doing this, we remember that we too, are sinners and in need of God's mercy.

God bless you.