5th Sunday of Lent

BEFORE MASS: As you know, praying to the Holy Spirit and entering into the scene of a Gospel can be a powerful way to bring home the message. At the risk of giving away the homily, let me invite you to enter the scene of today’s Gospel, the woman caught in adultery, and from inside the story, look closely at Jesus. When Jesus says “Let the one without sin cast the first stone”, from what you know of Jesus, and with the Holy Spirit’s help: Where is his focus? What is his body language? What does his tone of voice communicate? Most importantly, what does he want us to hear?

HOMILY:

Bringing our life, and the Scriptures together is the goal, the heart of the Liturgy of the Word, the first half of Mass. Our life experience, and the scriptures, each help open up the other. Bringing them together helps us find God more clearly in the scriptures, and in our experience.

This week we had the Day of Mercy & Penance. Bringing this Gospel into the confessional, and experience in the confession to the Gospel seem to make perfect sense. Both include a one on one with Jesus. Both reveal a life changing mercy. Both lead us into the Lord’s heart of mercy.

So let me begin with Wednesday, and past Days of Mercy. We priests certainly don’t count or keep track, but after a seven hour day of confessions, it is hard not to notice some things. What do you think are the 2 most frequent sins adults bring to the sacrament of reconciliation? (This is a rhetorical question – I’m not looking for what you may have brought!) Although selfishness and pride are two very close runners up, I believe number one and number two of things confessed are impatience, and being judgmental.

Even though I’m drawn to unpack some of the history of this story, how it has spent time in both Luke’s Gospel and John’s, the other historical details and such, since clearly the Gospel is about sin, judgement, mercy and the lack of mercy, let’s look at the Gospel from the perspective of the observation I just made from the Day of Mercy.

Is there anything about patience in this Gospel? Anything about being judgmental?

Before going there, let me offer a brief sidebar about impatience and sin. Impatience in itself isn’t necessarily a sin, or something requiring confession. The real issue is where impatience can lead us, and whether we have allowed our impatience to lead us there.

I could be in a line at check out, and three people ahead of me, there is a log jam for some reason. I can think or feel “Why do I always choose the wrong line!” That is impatience, but not really a sin.

However, my impatience could lead me to glare at the customer causing the slow down, and then be rude to the cashier – now we are perhaps approaching venial sin. The kind Mass can certainly cover with mercy.
But here is the real sin. Our impatience can lead us to belittle, blame, and break the spirit of those we love, or those we don’t for that matter – that is worth bringing to the sacrament of reconciliation.

I have someone I care about, I suspect most of us do, who has an amazing ability to make bad choices. Sin is when I say “Are you serious!? What were you thinking! I can’t believe you did something that stupid. When are you going to start listening to advice?”

Grace is apologizing: “I’m sorry, in my frustration I allowed myself to turn into someone I don’t want to be. I don’t really want to hurt you, but I know my words do. Please forgive me.”

Better yet, grace is saying: “Ok, we both know that didn’t turn out well. Let’s see what we can do to work this out. And here are some other ways you could have handled this situation. In the future, try to remember to look before you leap. I know you can do it … I’ve seen you make good choices.”

The people we love deserve better than impatience, opening the door to frustration, then anger, then finding fault and firing away mercilessly.

To the Gospel: I imagine Jesus longed to have the scribes’ and Pharisee’s attempt to trap him over. (You can read about how they were trying to trap him on page 3 in the bulletin.) Let’s get them off the scene, so can speak a word of mercy and forgiveness to this mortified woman. Why did they have to make her feel like dirt, when their real target is me?

With patience, Jesus offered a challenge to those who were baiting him and simply using the poor woman, he wrote in the sand, and waited his detractors to clear. Perfect model of patience. Find something neutral to do and wait, rather than find fault, throw stones, or do any of the other things impatience can lead us to do, which we will later regret.

Now to being judgmental. Clearly the scribes and Pharisees give us a picture of being judgmental. Judging the woman, yes. But even more, judging Jesus, for his love, mercy, and his outreach to the lost and forsaken, to tax collectors and sinners.

Clearly Jesus turned the tables, escaping the trap they had designed, and putting them on the spot.

But let’s get to the question I posed as we began. What about his body language, the look on his face, the tone of voice?

Was it “ah hah! Thought you had me, didn’t you? Take this!”

Or was there profound sadness, because he loved them, and could see how trapped they were in their self-righteousness and judgmental approach to others?

Why can’t you see how wrong it is to be using this woman the way you are? Why is it so hard for you to understand mercy?
I think if we really understood mercy, we would see his comment as providing the opportunity for the scribes and Pharisees to stop, think about what they were doing, let their consciences kick in, and have a change of heart.

They didn’t have to walk away angry at being bested. They could have had their eyes opened. Perhaps that’s why the walking away began with the eldest, those wiser with age.

If we want to rediscover Jesus, to know him better, to see our way to becoming more Christ-like, now let’s look at how he speaks to the woman when he says: “Has no one condemned you. Neither do I condemn you. Go, and from now on do not sin anymore.”

When someone recognizes the mess you have gotten yourself into, offers a hand to lift you out, looks into your eyes, shows that much love, compassion, and understanding, and then asks you, with such gentleness, to amend your life, to change your ways, to turn away from sin, how can your heart not be changed?

To REALLY bring it all home, after looking at Jesus’ focus, his body language, and his tone of voice, let’s all look at our own, when impatience is pulling us in the wrong direction, or a judgmental streak is getting out of control. For the times we’ve found the grace to turn back, and not cross the line, we can give thanks in our Eucharist today. For the times we have failed, we can ask forgiveness. Either way, Jesus is showing us a better way in this Gospel. May it be a lesson we take home, and live.