

Fifth Sunday of Lent Year "C"

April 6-7, 2019

Readings: Isaiah 43:16-21; Philippians 3:8-14; John 8:1-11

Perhaps I should have been a doctor after all. I say this because I needed an intervention from my mother on account of my poor penmanship. She pleaded with my exasperated 3<sup>rd</sup> grade teacher to excuse me from writing in cursive any longer. It was a lost cause; or better yet, I was a lost cause! I merrily went along my way, printing everything.

I say this by way of introduction due to a rather curious phrase in our Gospel that has occasioned much speculation concerning Jesus. It centers on the account of the woman caught in adultery, whose ending everyone knows. "Let the one among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." However, portions of this account remain mysterious to this day, specifically two things: (1) who was this woman? and (2) what was Jesus writing when he bent down with his finger to the ground?

The story provides few details on the particular circumstances about this situation except to say that it was early in the morning. The Book of Deuteronomy lists various penalties for specific offenses. If a betrothed woman was caught in adultery with a man, both were stoned to death. It seems logical to conclude that this is what was about to happen here, though only the woman is present here.

Had the woman been found guilty in a court, or did the witnesses to the alleged crime also serve as judge and jury? Was this a kangaroo court, a mob taking matters into its own hands? Jesus adds a couple of questions to which he receives no answer- "Has no one condemned you?" and "Woman, where are they?" They are clearly rhetorical questions, for the answer is obvious by the absence of those who condemned her. According to the Mosaic Law, the first stones were to be thrown by the witnesses themselves.<sup>1</sup> And yet, one by one, each went away.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Deuteronomy 17:7

They were phrased in such a way that the woman did not need to answer. They were reassurances more than anything else. “You see, the coast is clear—there is no one left to condemn you.” The fact that Jesus is addressed as ‘teacher,’ means that he is now put in a difficult place.

The Law of Moses was quite clear that this offense is punishable by death, leaving aside for a moment whether or not there was a trial. If Jesus speaks against the stoning then he is attacking the authority of Moses, and thereby of God. In addition, if the Jews no longer had the legal right to sentence one to death and Jesus wanted to uphold the Mosaic Law, now he becomes an anti-Roman revolutionary. He is really stuck here. The text even records this detail: “They said this to test him.”

But Jesus avoids giving a direct answer. He stoops down and writes with his finger on the ground. What was he writing? This question has kept scholars and preachers busy for the better part of 2000 years. Many early Church Fathers detected in this action of Jesus, a reference to a passage from the Book of the prophet Jeremiah which reads: “The rebels shall be enrolled in the netherworld; they have forsaken the LORD, source of living waters.”<sup>2</sup>

This likely refers to the names of those seeking to condemn. St. Jerome explained that Jesus was writing down the sins of the accusers themselves and of all people, a powerful visual recognizing that all are sinners and that as such, have no jurisdiction to make such a determination.

The questioners condemned the woman with all the force and severity of the law at their disposal. Stoning to death was a barbaric practice and sadly even is being resurrected in some corners of the world with respect to various moral transgressions. Jesus simply refers them to the judgment of God, before whom all are sinners. All of us have sins that are fit to be ‘written in the earth.’

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Jeremiah 17:13

It is worth noting that the identity of the woman is not mentioned. Centuries after the fact, the name Mary Magdalene becomes associated with this episode, in large part due to the sermons of Pope St. Gregory the Great. Our beautifully restored window depicting St. Mary Magdalene is directly above the confessional I use. I am humbled and honored.

Luke (8:2) merely describes her as one of many women whom Jesus had healed of evil spirits and sickness. Since the fourth century, however, she has been portrayed as a public sinner who, after encountering Jesus, repented and spent the rest of her life in private prayer and penitence.<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, much of this story remains shrouded in mystery, and therein lies part of its strength. Much is unknown, but what is known is more than enough to make up for any lack of detail. It has provided rich material upon which to reflect. More importantly for the sake of our souls, the account highlights the tender mercy of our Lord who was not afraid to stand up to the angry crowd, at great personal risk, to protect the woman caught in adultery.

Jesus not only spares her physical life; more importantly, he gives her back her spiritual life by forgiving her sin and sending her on her way with the admonition to commit no further sin. He calls a sin a sin but refuses to condemn the repentant woman. This is the classic distinction between hating the sin, loving the sinner, calling one to a future filled with virtue by having first forgiven a past full of vice. May this be a valuable Lenten lesson for all of us.

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<sup>3</sup> Eventually, the final identification of Mary as public reformed sinner achieved official standing with the homilies of Pope Gregory the Great (540-604 AD). Gregory's identification of Mary as a repentant sexual sinner appealed to the popular imagination and led to an effort to reconstruct her history from the Scriptures. Indeed, Gregory combined the three "Mary's" of the Gospels, three separate people in the Eastern (Greek) tradition, into this single Mary, (1) Mary Magdalene. Also, (2) Mary of Bethany, the sister of Lazarus and Martha mentioned in Luke 10: 38-42 and John 11: 1-45, and (3) the unnamed woman 'who was a sinner' and who, according to Luke 7: 37-50 began to wet his feet with her tears, and wiped them with the hair of her head, and kissed his feet and anointed them with ointment'.

Since the 14th century, the word "magdalene" has meant former or reformed prostitute. Why was she thought of as a prostitute? Magdala, a hamlet on the west of the Sea of Galilee, was where Roman troops were garrisoned. Troop towns often have prostitutes associated with them. Mary was from Magdala, a town of ill repute. It is likely that that association rubbed off on her.