

Fifth Sunday of Lent - C

“Jesus arrived in the temple area...and all the people started coming to him.”

If the scribes and Pharisees were tempted to ignore Jesus and his teaching before, with his arrival in the temple area to teach there, that luxury no longer exists. They are confronted with the necessity of doing something about it.

And so, they choose a trap: We will bring a case that highlights most clearly the disparity between the teaching of Jesus, focused as it is on the mercy of God, and the law of Moses.

Their intentions could not have been plainer if they had hired a band of drums and trumpets and marched into the temple area behind a banner that read, “We are out to get you, Jesus!”

According to Law of Moses, the passing of a sentence of stoning would have been the job of the Sanhedrin, not the scribes and Pharisees.

Even though the case at hand has to do with the woman caught in adultery, what’s really on trial is Jesus’ teaching and his authority vis-à-vis the authority of the law of Moses.

“Moses commanded us to stone such women, so what do you say?”

Before Jesus says anything he bends down and writes with his finger on the ground.

Wouldn’t you have liked to have been there to read what he wrote? A great deal of speculation has been done over the centuries regarding what Jesus would have written.

You can make a case that it was likely that it was something that came from the Law of Moses. Do we have any examples of fingers writing in the dirt?

We do have an example of God writing with his finger on the stone tablets that Moses brought down to the people from Mount Sinai.

An interesting aspect of that story is that, when Moses arrived in the camp with the stone tablets in hand, the people were in the midst of worshipping the golden calf—which Israelite tradition equated with an act of adultery.

Moses threw down the stone tablets, went back up the mountain and basically told God to give up on the Israelites because they were a stiff-necked people prone to stray from the covenant.

Rather than do that, God shows them mercy and again applies his finger to the stone and rewrites the 10 commandments.

From the beginning God shows that he is not going to let the infidelity of Israel keep him from being true to his word.

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After the first writing on the ground, Jesus stands and invites those who have not sinned to cast the first stone. Then he bends down and writes again. Is he drawing a parallel to what God had done so many centuries before on Mount Sinai? Is putting judgment before mercy the new form of idolatry that the people of Israel have fallen into?

In any case, the bending down and writing again on the ground does give the scribes and Pharisees the chance to rethink their strategy, and slowly, beginning with the elders, they slink away.

Turns out, no one present has not had need to call upon the mercy of God. That has been there from the very beginning. It is the foundation upon which the Law of Moses rests. Without it, the history of the people of Israel would never gotten past its beginning episode in the desert.

We still have need of this reminder. God's mercy is the fount and foundation of all that comes after, including the Law.

It is the universal common denominator of not only our Christian identity, but our identity and human beings.

The person who believes never to have had need of God's mercy is alienated from his or her own reality and in

danger of cutting himself or herself off from the source of life.

As we move ever more closely to the celebration of Easter we are encouraged, not only to avoid judging others, which can only be done by a person who has forgotten what God has done for him, for her,

but most of all we are encouraged to let our image of God be corrected so that his mercy becomes not just one attribute among many, but the primary identifying feature of the God who has claimed us for his own—not because we deserved it, but simply because he wanted to.

Jesus does not stand over and against Moses and the Law given through him. Jesus simply embodies the desire of God to be our God, through thick and thin, through infidelity and faithfulness, come what may.

We stand in awe, which is the appropriate response, and take it upon ourselves to proclaim that good news and to leave judgment and condemnation aside.