

The Fifth Sunday of Lent

(Year C)

| | |
|---------------------------|--|
| <i>First Reading</i> | Isaiah 43:16-21 |
| <i>Response</i> | The Lord has done great things for us; we are filled with joy. |
| <i>Psalm</i> | Psalm 126:1-2, 2-3, 4-5, 6 |
| <i>Second Reading</i> | Philippians 3:8-14 |
| <i>Gospel Acclamation</i> | Even now, says the Lord, return to me with your whole heart; for I am gracious and merciful. |
| <i>Gospel</i> | John 8:1-11 |

The 5th Sunday in Lent for Year C brings us to one of the most famous stories in all of the gospels. It is the story of Jesus and the woman caught in adultery. What's unique about this week though is the Church takes the gospel for today not from the Gospel of Luke (which is what we've been reading from throughout ordinary time and through Lent up to this point), but from the Gospel of John. This is in John 8:1-11 and so we're going to look at this text. It's a good example of how the Church will take very important passages from John and kind of scatter them throughout the three year cycle of gospel readings, especially during the seasons of Lent and Easter. So, without any further ado, let's dive in, we'll look at the gospel for today and then try to unpack this very famous (and actually, in some ways, kind of controversial) text. In John 8:1-11 we read these words:

Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. Early in the morning he came again to the temple; all the people came to him, and he sat down and taught them. The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery, and placing her in the midst they said to him, "Teacher, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery. Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such. What do you say about her?" This they said to test him, that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. And as they continued to ask him, he stood up and said to them, "Let him who is without sin among you be the

first to throw a stone at her." And once more he bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. But when they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the eldest, and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. Jesus looked up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" She said, "No one, Lord." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you; go, and do not sin again."¹

Alright, like many stories in John, it's brief, but there is a lot going on. So let me say a few points about this particular account. First and foremost, this is a unique text with regard to what scholars call "textual criticism". That's the study of ancient Greek manuscripts of the gospels. Well, not just ancient Greek, ancient manuscripts in any language: Greek, or Latin, or other ancient languages. In this case, what's striking about John 8:1-11 is the passage about the woman caught in adultery is missing from all of the earliest Greek manuscripts of the gospel that we possess. So for example, the *papyrus 66* (which is one of the oldest copies of John) doesn't have this story. *Codex Sinaiticus* and *Codex Vaticanus*, two very famous ancient 4th Century Greek copies of the Gospel of John – they do not have the story of the woman caught in adultery in John chapter 8:1-11. It just skips from the end of John 7, right down to John 8:12. And by the way, this was before any verses were added to the gospels. On the other hand, it's fascinating – the text is present in ancient Latin copies of the Gospel of John. Early Latin manuscripts do have this story, which is why, for example, when St. Augustine, in the 4th Century, wrote his homilies on the Gospel of John, he has a very famous homily on the woman caught in adultery (which I'm actually going to quote from a little bit later).

So we know it was in Augustine's copy of the Gospel of John by the 4th Century A.D. Also, there are some Greek manuscripts where the text appears to be floating. So, some copies of John's gospel have the story of the woman caught in adultery after John 21:25, which is toward the end of the book. And then still others, other Greek copies of the New Testament, have the story of the woman caught in adultery in the Gospel of Luke. I think it's after chapter 21, verse 38 (so toward the end, right before the Passion of Jesus). In other words, the story is kind of floating around in ancient manuscript traditions. So it's not clear, and most scholars in fact don't think that the story was original to the Gospel of John (when John was first

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

published), but that it was floating around and it was added later. Is that true? We don't know. It's really difficult to ascertain exactly what the original form of John's gospel was in this case, whether it had it (as the Latin manuscripts seem to suggest) or whether it didn't have it (such as the Greek manuscripts seem to suggest). And scholars have speculated, maybe some ancient scribes removed the story because it could be interpreted as Jesus condoning adultery. That's one theory that has been forwarded, that it was like "too difficult to be preached" and so it was cut out of certain gospels. We don't know that for certain, but what is clear is that this chapter is the inspired word of God. How do we know that? How do we know it belongs to the Bible? Because the Church has told us that it does. It is part of the early Vulgate, which is considered the authentic collection of what books (and also) what chapters, so-to-speak, went into the bible. Although there are some text-critical questions about whether this passage appeared originally right here in John's gospel, the Church treats the text as canonical scripture, as the inspired word of God, because God has given the Church the authority to tell us what books, what ancient books, are scripture (are inspired), sacred scripture, and what books do not belong in the bible. Books like *First Clement*, *The Shepard of Hermas*, or *The Gospel of Thomas*, those are not inspired scripture. But this story of Jesus and the woman caught in adultery is inspired scripture. And we know that because the Church reads it in the Liturgy. That's not just because it appears in the bible, but because it's part of the Liturgy.

So, with that little background in mind, just to give you a little window on this, a little bit of controversy about this particular text, let's ask ourselves: what does it mean? What's going on? In this case, a few elements stand out as important: First, the context. Where does this happen? Well, this episode happens when Jesus is teaching in the temple in Jerusalem. And many of the episodes in the Gospel of John have that setting. One of the differences between John and the synoptic gospels is that Matthew, Mark and Luke, the bulk of Jesus' teaching in those gospels is either in Galilee (in the north) or on the way to Jerusalem (like in the Gospel of Luke). But in John's gospel, a large number of Jesus' teachings are set in Jerusalem (and not just in Jerusalem but in the temple). So this is a very public place, it's a place where teachers and rabbis and scribes and Pharisees, they would gather to discuss the law and to teach about the Torah; it was kind of like the Jewish equivalent of Plato's Academy or The City of Athens, in the Acropolis, in Greece, where Greek philosophers and pagans would gather to exchange ideas, to learn from one another (that kind of thing). So Jesus is in the temple complex, he's teaching the Jewish people (who are there in the temple) and in that context, the

Pharisees and the scribes bring before him a woman who's been caught in the act of adultery.

So let's pause there. One of the curious things about this is that although she's caught in the act, the man, who is obviously guilty as well, isn't brought on to the scene. Who was he? Where was he? Why wasn't he brought there before Jesus also? We don't know. What we do know, is that in ancient Israel, in the Old Testament, in the book of Numbers 5, there's a whole chapter dedicated to the suspected adulteress, and the test that would be given to a woman if she was suspected of adultery. She would be brought into the temple and subject to a test if her husband suspected her of adultery. Now, in this case, there is no test that's given, because there isn't just a suspicion of adultery, she's been caught in the very act of adultery. So that fast forwards her straight into the situation of having to deal with the penalty for adultery, which in the Law of Moses, the penalty for adultery is death by stoning. Any 1st Century Jew would have known this. However, because we're not 1st Century Jews, I'll just read the passage to you so that you're aware of the law.

In Deuteronomy 22:22-24, it says this:

"If a man is found lying with the wife of another man, both of them shall die, the man who lay with the woman, and the woman; so you shall purge the evil from Israel."

And it goes on to specify (in verse 24)

"...you shall stone them to death with stones"

So it specifies that the manner of death is death by stoning. So, in this case, any Jew would have known that adultery, meaning to have relations with someone's spouse (it's different from fornication, which would be to have relations outside of the marital covenant), to have relations with a married man or married woman, is to break one of the Ten Commandments (Thou shall not commit adultery, that's the 6th Commandment). And in the Mosaic Law, a grave violation of any one of the Ten Commandments is punishable by death. So if you commit idolatry, the punishment is death. If you blaspheme the holy name of God, the punishment is death. If you desecrate the Sabbath, and work on the Sabbath, the punishment is death. If you curse your father and mother, it's a capital crime – punished with death. If you commit adultery, it's punishable by death. If you kidnap someone, in other words, commit grave theft, it's punishable by death. So human trafficking would be a capi-

tal punishment crime in the Old Testament. If you bear false witness in a murder case, the punishment is death. So, I'm just trying to put it in context here. The reason she's subject to death is because she's violated one of the Ten Commandments, and it's one of the few commandments where the kind of execution is specified in the Old Testament. Deuteronomy 22 says, "You shall bring them out and stone them to death". Now notice, Deuteronomy envisions the execution of both the man and the woman. In this case, all they have is the woman, and that's who they bring before Jesus.

And so, now that you've got that background, you can understand what's happening here. They say to Jesus, "In the Law, Moses commanded us to stone such. What do you say about her?" Now John tells us here that they're doing this to put Jesus to the test, so that they might have a charge to bring against him. Now, in order to understand what that means we need to be clear of the nature of the test (what kind of charge do they hope to bring against him). Well essentially here, they're trying to entrap Jesus because they're putting him between a rock and a hard place. On the one hand, if he says, "Don't stone her, let her go", he can be accused or charged of violating the Law of Moses (which we just saw, in Deuteronomy 22, as well as in Leviticus 20, which says that an adulteress, a woman guilty of adultery, or a man, is to be put to death). So if he says, "Let her go, don't stone her", he can be called a law breaker. On the other hand, if he says "Stone her to death" in the Jewish temple, in a very public place, he could also be accused of violating the Roman law, because later on in the Gospel of John (chapter 18, verse 31), you might recall Pilate taunts the the Jewish leaders and says, "Take him yourself and judge him according to your own law" and the Jews said, "It is not lawful for us to put any man to death." Now, they don't mean it's not in accordance with the Law of Moses, they mean it's not in accordance with Roman law. The Roman law took away the authority of the Jewish leaders to execute anyone. They don't have a court that can try capital cases. Those have to be brought before the Roman procurator for the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate in this case. So, if Jesus says "stone her", then these same Pharisees and scribes could then charge Jesus with having initiated an execution which it was unlawful for a Jew to do, which for a prominent Jewish rabbi and leader like Jesus, could get him hauled off to prison.

If you see there, there are two situations here: either he gets in trouble with the Jewish authorities for being a breaker of the Mosaic Law, or he can get in trouble with the Roman authorities for breaking Roman law. And so they think that they've caught him, they think that they've got him. Now, just a basic rule of thumb: don't

try to trap Jesus of Nazareth. Don't try to put him in a situation, because what's going to happen (if you try to entrap him) is that the trap that you set is going to spring back upon you. You'll see this happen in various situations in the gospels, where people try to stump Jesus with a hard question or they put him to the test, or in this case they try to actually set up a situation where he can be charged with a crime. So they set the trap and it springs back in their own face in a couple of ways.

First, notice Jesus responds to them by writing in the dirt. Now that's a weird response, but John's really clear that Jesus responds by bending down and writing with his finger on the ground. And John tells us this (people usually miss this): that Jesus did it twice. So he's clearly emphasizing it, it's a gesture that's meant to be called attention to, it's meant to draw our attention, and yet, at the same time it's strange. What is Jesus doing writing in the dirt? Well, you can imagine, over the centuries, commentators have gone wild trying to figure out "What is Jesus doing? Why is he writing in the dirt?" And again, you've probably heard preachers or homilists speculate about this. Some people will say that Jesus wrote the sins of the scribes and Pharisees in the dirt, and when they saw their sins being listed in the sand, they were kind of moved to repentance and they left in shame. That's a very popular explanation of it. Others will say that he was just ignoring the scribes and Pharisees, kind of "doodling on the ground", that's one possibility as well. If you look at the history of interpretation there are kind of three major explanations. First, some people just say that it's a sign of indifference. In other words, he is just basically snubbing the scribes and Pharisees. That's one possibility. A second one is that he writes the sins of the accusers in the dirt. That actually goes all the way back to Jerome (interestingly enough, I just learned that as I was researching for this explanation; it's fascinating). So in Jerome's book against Pelagius, he speculates that that might be what had happened. But the most popular explanation, the one that's taken actually not just by St. Ambrose, but by St. Augustine himself, as well as more recent Catholic biblical scholars, is that Jesus here is performing a sign that's a fulfillment of prophecy. So if you go back to the book of Jeremiah 17, there is a passage in the Old Testament that actually talks about writing in the dirt, and it's got a couple of striking parallels with the Gospel of John. In Jeremiah 17: 1, 13, we hear these words:

"The sin of Judah is written with a pen of iron"

That's verse 1. If you skip down to verse 13, this is the main verse. It says this:

O Lord, the hope of Israel, all who forsake thee shall be put to shame; those who turn away from thee shall be written in the earth, for they have forsaken the Lord, the fountain of living water.

Alright, let's pause there. In its original context what Jeremiah is basically describing is that the names of those who forsake the God of Israel (who've abandoned him), they're going to be written in the dirt as a kind of sign of condemnation, like a sign of judgment upon them, because they've forsaken the fountain of living water (the Lord).

Now, in light of that prophecy, if you fast forward to the New Testament, it's really fascinating. In John 8, Jesus is writing in the dirt and saying, "Let he who is without sin cast the first stone." And then in John 7, what does Jesus identify himself as? The fountain of living water. He says, "out of his heart shall flow rivers of flowing water". So when you link up the image of sin being written in the dirt and the fountain of living water, being rejected by the leaders of Judah, the leaders of Israel, some scholars have suggested that what Jesus is doing is basically performing a sign of judgment against the leaders in Jerusalem, the scribes and the Pharisees, who have rejected him (the fountain of living water), so that their sin is being written in the earth as a judgment against them; as a condemnation of them. It's a riddle. It's a prophecy that puts the Scribes and Pharisees in the role of the sinful leaders of Judah that Jeremiah had prophesied against in the Old Testament. And when they see the sign performed in light of that prophecy, they are convicted and it says that each one of them, beginning with the eldest, walks away and leaves Jesus and the woman alone. So that's the third explanation for it, a kind of prophetic sign (which Jesus does all the time in the gospels), and that's the one I'm most inclined to, and that's the interpretation of St. Augustine. In any case, what matters for us is Jesus springs the trap on them. They are unable to push him (force him) into either letting the woman go or authorizing her being stoned and then getting in trouble with the Roman authorities.

Now there's one other aspect of this that I would just highlight (real quick) as a side note. Which is this: some of my students when I used to teach on this would say, "Well, Dr. Pitre though, doesn't Jesus break the law in doing that? If the law of Deuteronomy 22 says she was to be stoned, isn't he breaking the law by not stoning her?" Well, what's interesting is, in the book of Deuteronomy 17:6 it also says that "no one shall be put to death on the testimony of just one witness", you have to have the testimony of 2 or 3 witnesses (in Deuteronomy 17:6). So what happens

in John 8, is that all of the witnesses depart, and so when Jesus looks up from writing in the dirt, what does he say to the woman? “Has no one condemned you?” Everyone’s left, no one’s testified against her. All that are left are he and the woman. So it’s just him and her. And she says, “Well no one, Lord.” And Jesus says “Neither do I condemn you. Go, and don’t sin again.” I’m speculating a little bit here but I think it’s interesting at least that Jesus creates the situation where there actually aren’t two witnesses to testify against her, which is what would be necessary in the law for someone to be put to death. So even here, by springing the trap, he is faithful to the Mosaic Law. In other words, it would be a violation of the Mosaic Law for him to pick up a stone and put her to death just with one person. That would break the law. You had to have two public witnesses to testify. If you want an analogy of this, remember at the Trial of Sanhedrin? They’re trying to drum up two witnesses to testify that Jesus said he would destroy the temple, because they can’t put him to death if you don’t have at least two people willing to publicly charge him with a crime, and that’s what doesn’t happen here with the woman. So he says to her, “Neither do I condemn you” and then his final words (so important), “Go and sin no more.” He calls her to repent, to change her life, to turn away from her life of adultery and to not commit that sin again. It is a beautiful, beautiful story of divine mercy, and also the call to change one’s life from a life of sin.

Alright, with that in mind, let’s go back to the Old Testament reading. The Old Testament reading for today is not from Jeremiah 17 (the passage I read to you as the prophecy), because we’re in Lent and the Old Testament texts are about salvation history. And in this case, the Church gives us a prophecy from the book of Isaiah 43:16 and following. This passage is about the new exodus. So in previous readings from Lent we heard about the first exodus from Egypt in the time of Moses and the entry into the Promised Land, this is a prophecy that looks forward to a new exodus.

Thus says the LORD,
who makes a way in the sea,
a path in the mighty waters,
who brings forth chariot and horse,
army and warrior;
they lie down, they cannot rise,
they are extinguished, quenched like a wick:
"Remember not the former things,

nor consider the things of old.
Behold, I am doing a new thing;
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?
I will make a way in the wilderness
and rivers in the desert.
The wild beasts will honor me,
the jackals and the ostriches;
for I give water in the wilderness,
rivers in the desert,
to give drink to my chosen people,
the people whom I formed for myself
that they might declare my praise.

So, what is God talking about? He's saying "I'm going to do a new thing. I'm going to inaugurate a new exodus. I'm going to make a new way in the wilderness. I'm going to give new springs of water in the wilderness." And this is not going to be an earthly exodus and an earthly journey to an earthly promised land, with earthly water to sustain our earthly thirst in the Sinai Desert. It's the new exodus of Jesus Christ that is going to be a supernatural journey through the waters of baptism to the heavenly promised land of the New Jerusalem. That's this final prophecy that the Church gives us in the 5th Sunday of Lent as we're looking forward to the exodus that Jesus is going to accomplish in Jerusalem through his Passion, Death and Resurrection.

In closing for today, I'd just like to end with a quote from Augustine. He wrote a very beautiful series of homilies on the Gospel of John. And although the story of the woman caught in adultery is missing from some ancient Greek copies of John's gospel, it's not missing (or at least it wasn't missing from St. Augustine's ancient Latin copy of the gospel), so we're blessed to have one of his homilies on this. One of the things Augustine wrestles with in his homily is the question of, "Is God condoning the sin of the adulteress by not having her put to death?" Isn't God being a little too lenient here with what is obviously a very serious sin? Adultery is a grave sin. It not only violates the Ten Commandments, it breaks the marital covenant, it destroys families; it destroys homes. Think of all the human pain and suffering and tears and heartache and children who've been hurt by the sin of adultery. This is a very serious sin. How can Jesus just let the woman go and say, "Go and sin no more."? What do we make of this act of our Lord? So Augustine looks at this pas-

sage that actually scandalized some Christians, and this is what he said about Jesus' response to the woman caught in adultery:

[L]ook at the way our Lord's answer upheld justice without forgoing clemency. He was not caught in the snare his enemies had laid for him; it is they themselves who were caught in it. He did not say the woman should not be stoned, for then it would look as though he were opposing the law. But he had no intention of saying: 'Let her be stoned', because he came not to destroy those he found but to seek those who were lost. Mark his reply. It contains justice, clemency, and truth in full measure... What is this, Lord, are you giving approval to immorality? Not at all. Take note of what follows: "Go and sin no more." You see then that the Lord does indeed pass sentence, but it is sin he condemns, not people. One who would have approved of immorality would have said: 'Neither will I condemn you. Go and live as you please; you can be sure that I will acquit you. However much you sin, I will release you from all penalty, and from the tortures of hell and the underworld'. He did not say that. He said: 'Neither will I condemn you': you need have no fear of the past, but beware of what you do in the future. 'Neither will I condemn you': I have blotted out what you have done; now observe what I have commanded, in order to obtain what I have promised.²

And I'll just say, especially to all those Catechumens coming into the Church at Easter time, remember this: what's past is past. The Lord does not condemn you for what you have done. Now, go, sin no more and live a new life in Christ, either through the waters of baptism for those who are coming into the Church or through the graces of confession for those of us who are in it. Let us enter into the Easter season turning away from sin and turning our hearts and our minds to God.

² Augustine, *Homilies on the Gospel of John*, 33.6-7; trans. E. Barnecut